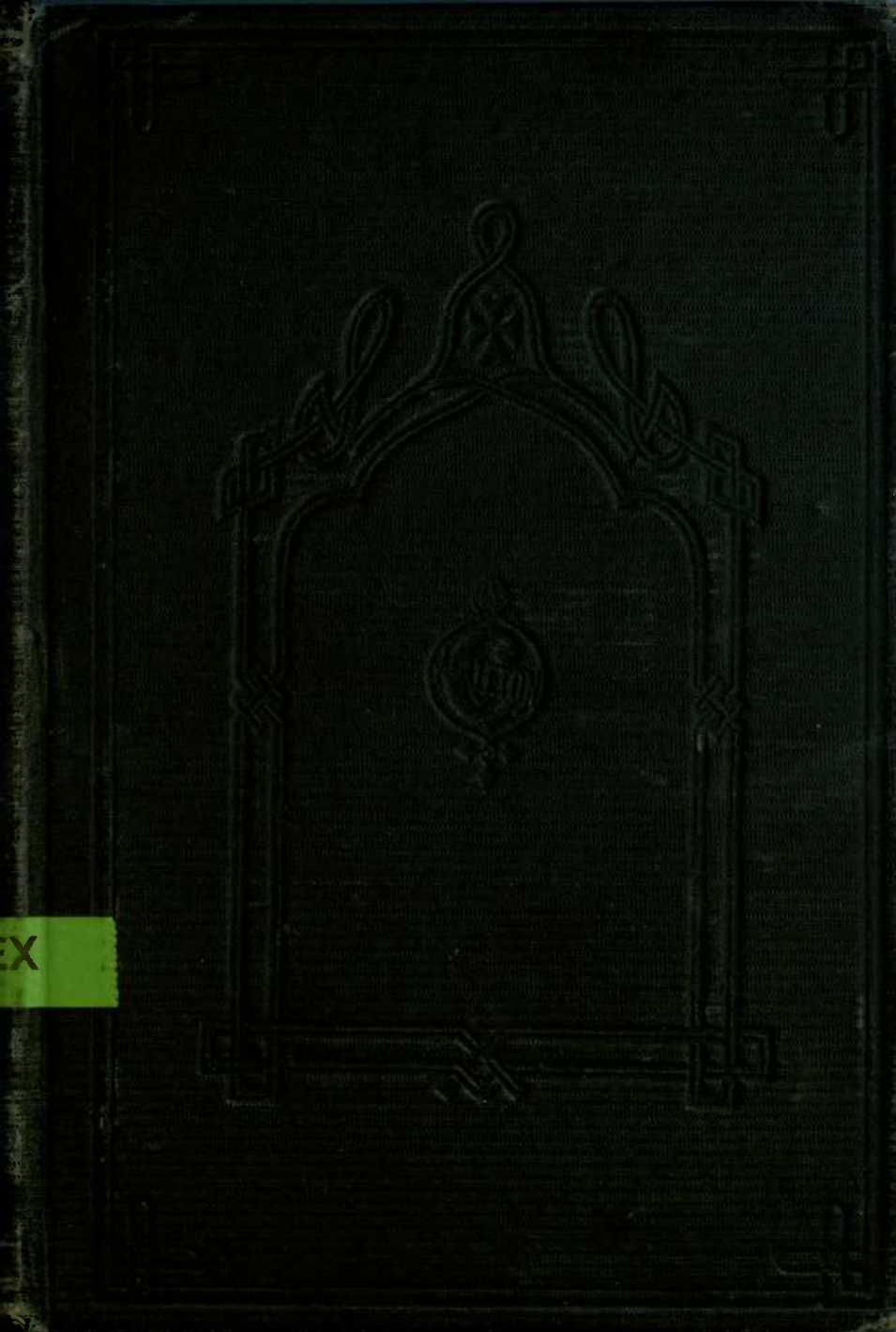

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# MY LITTLE LOVE.

BY

MARION HARLAND,

AUTHOR OF

"ALONE," "HIDDEN PATH," "MOSS-SIDE," "NEMESIS," "MIRIAM,"
"AT LAST," "TRUE AS STEEL," "JESSAMINE,"
"FROM MY YOUTH UP," ETC., ETC.

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*TO THE MEMORY*

OF

"THE SWEETEST SOUL

THAT EVER LOOKED WITH HUMAN EYES."

MARION HARLAND.

2072323

"You could hardly have seen *her* face thoroughly meeting yours without believing that human creatures had done nobly in times past, and might do more nobly in times to come. The finest child-faces have this consecrating power, and make us shudder anew at all the grossness and basely-wrought griefs of the world, lest they should enter here and defile."

GEORGE ELIOT *(Daniel Deronda)*.

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# *MY LITTLE LOVE.*

## CHAPTER I.

"THERE'S SAND—NOW!"

ENT to the country to recover his health!"

It was stamped all over me as legibly as if I had been hung with painted canvas, white ground, black lettered, like the animated sign-boards one meets on city streets—automata who have sold the birthright of manhood for five cents an hour and the moral privilege of making known to curious and loathing spectators the virtues and price of "Detersive Soap" and "Balm of a Million Flowers."

Very white as to face, very black as to eyebrows and hair and sunken eyes, a mere bundle of long-drawn-out bones and lax sinews, indifferent, in the main, about the preservation in any circumstances of the scanty remains of vitality spared by the six weeks of fever from which I had just escaped with what people were pleased to call life—yet preferring, if the matter were left to me, to scrape together the wrecks anywhere else than just where I found myself on a

certain tenth of June, when I recollected that I was twenty-one years old.

The date was recalled to me in this wise :

"Deary me!" said the grand-dame of the farm-house to which I had been consigned during my supposed convalescence. "A Wednesday mornin', and the tenth day of June, in the year of our Lord, Anner Dominy—ain't it? We was married—yer Pa 'n' me, fifty-seven year ago this very arternoon, Ezry. It don't 'pear as if it could 'a been. Peace! peace! when there's no peace! And him a-lyin' in his grave in the churchyard, with a black slate stun at his head, this twenty year, poor man! It's fa'r tuk away my appertite—not to say that I had much to start with!"

She pushed away the bowl of "rye 'n' Injun bread" soaked in milk, which she affected, she was careful to inform me at each meal, "because she hadn't no teeth to speak of." Truth to say, I should have been better satisfied had her want of these troublesome yet useful appliances been passed over in silence as discreet.

I also had had no appetite to begin with, nor found aught provocative of zest in the salt herrings and stale bread, white and brown, the weak, over-sweetened coffee and cold boiled potatoes that composed the regulation morning meal. Increased disrelish, and of a more decided type, seized upon palate and diaphragm at the crone's speech.

It was my birthday. I had attained my majority, speaking after the manner of men. Legally I was free, because white and twenty-one. I could even—and I descried grim pleas-

antry in the reflection—make a will, if I liked, and had anything worth the trouble of bequeathing over my hand and seal; might, in lawful seriousness, call all men to witness by these presents, that I was of sound mind, with as many other involvements of words and as royal disregard of sense as might suit my whim. I was the Benjamin of my tribe, yet neither brother, sister, nor my twice-wedded father had recollected what anniversary this was, or, if it were remembered, had cared to recognize it by written word or token. I was too weary and dull to be hurt by the omission. A sense of greater fatigue and of physical nausea moved me to mutter an excuse to the mistress of the board.

"Very excusable, Mr. Haye!" responded she, with an inclination of her sheet-iron figure.

Mrs. Ezra Gaskin prided herself upon an experimental acquaintance with the essential rules and forms of good society, country-bred though she was. Her phrase of acquiescence was "altogether the thing." She could not have respected herself had she failed to use it in the circumstances.

I made my way out of the apartment, half kitchen, half dining-room, where the breakfast-table was spread, into the porch beyond. Standing in the doorway of this, which was rankly overrun by old-fashioned "Matrimony-vine," I did not avoid hearing the farmer's comment upon my retreat.

"He hain't got no stomach for hullsome victuals. I minded yisterday, 'Liza, that he went raal white about the gills over your biled dinner, what was good enough for a

king. I could swallow a biled dinner if I lay at death's door. I guess there warn't never much peth into him, even when he was well."

I did not take the trouble to contradict him. What difference did it make, since the pith was missing from the frame that tottered down the hill, with queerly overlapping ankles—to hide itself like other spent animals in the woods—that I had been, within four months, the best wrestler and leaper in my college, and prided myself upon the length of limb that made me so often victor in skating and foot-races?

I was utterly fagged out by the time I gained the shelter of the maple-grove I had marked from my chamber-window as a place where I might be left to myself and the misery of my good-for-nothingness. It was fully a quarter of a mile from the farm-house, and I had not walked so far since my illness. The ground sloped prettily beyond the maples, cedars, white birches, and beeches taking their place. The undergrowth thickened into wildness toward the bottom of the hill, and, blent with the rustle of the leaves, I heard the ripple of water. I was always thirsty, then-a-days. My throat and mouth were drier and hotter for the sound that conjured up the vision of a gleaming, dancing brook. Sliding and stumbling, stopping twice to rest, I went down, down over slippery leaf-mould and mossy rocks, until I stood upon the brink of a shallow stream, so broad that the sun broke for itself a path between the foliage lining the banks, and glittered upon the gravel under the brown water. I scooped

up tremulous handfuls of the liquid, spilling much of it on the way to my mouth, and pitying myself for losing it.

I was sorry for myself, continually, the while I despised the unmanly emotion. Sorry—not that I was losing time from my studies, and forfeiting the opportunity of gaining the class-honor I had resolved to win, before the pith was taken out of me; not that my healthy relatives had not concerned themselves more evidently about my recovery and had taken no heed of my loss of spirits; but sadly compassionate for one with whom active feeling of whatever kind was no longer possible, for whom the lights and shadows of life had run into one dreary middle-tint. Sorrier than for all else that I was "so tired!" Not in body alone, but, as I phrased it, "tired all through."

I sat down upon a rock at the root of a tree, leaned against the trunk, and repeated aloud the sentence that stands at the head of this chapter:

"Sent to *the country* to recover his health!"

I laughed. My excellent father had unwittingly perpetrated a ghastly practical joke. There might have been a chance of revivification in the city, where the very air was instinct with the electric stir of human life. Here, the only luxuriance was vegetable. There, in time, my spirit might have rallied to the thought that existence was worth the keeping, where it brought so much that others, sane in body and mind, sought and prized. Here, one had only to sit still and let himself be drifted out of being into the dim Silence about which I could not take the trouble to speculate, except to

hope that in dreamless sleep I might be rid of the consciousness of tired self. I sat all huddled together, my lank hands crossed below my knees, which were drawn up to support my chin, and, because the sun's track a-down the brook was dazzling from its bright unsteadiness, I shut my eyes the better to commiserate myself. I was incapable of a connected line of thought, yet my memory strayed back—literally strayed, for I made no effort to control it—to the monotonous plaint of a young girl I had helped drag from the trampling hoofs of a runaway team in the street, the winter before my sickness. I held her head while we bore into the nearest druggist's the mangled thing that had been erect and well, sixty seconds ago, and stayed by her until a physician arrived. Ten minutes may have elapsed while I knelt by the lounge, wiping the blood and sweat from the drawn face that must have been pretty before it was so pale. It was like a half-a-day to me, and in all that time she said nothing but "Poor me! poor me!" over and over and over, until my brain rang with the hearing. I had read, too, as a neat bit of French pathos, the story of Madame de Stäel's consumptive niece and her tearful "*Je me regrette!*" It was something to regret the loss of the desire to live, if only because it presupposed the ruin of so much else.

"I am a wreck past rehabilitation," I said, with a very faint tincture of bitterness in the decision. "And I don't care!"

The clear brown water rippled through the grasses and tinkled over the gravel; the beeches and birches whispered

among themselves, and a lonely pine behind me sighed in the dreamy summer air. A robin chirped near by, and a crow cawed afar off.

"I have only to let go of sight, hearing, and breath, and drift out, drift out!" ran my thoughts to the rhythmic flow of the stream, gliding down to the unknown river in the lowlands.

"Dying must be easier work than living when one's vital apparatus was so badly damaged," I meditated further, still with no liveliness of curiosity. "What was the precise nature of the sensation of *letting go?* How much more feebly and sluggishly must the thin current in my wrists run before the veins were empty? And the heart, would it stagnate gradually, or the beat of the arterial pump be checked in mid-leap?" Finally, I wondered, if anything more were needed to end the pitiful playing at living, than to stop doing at all—to give up and be drifted out. I invariably came back to that.

I did not start, as some invalids would have done, at a splash and spatter in the stream. My nerves seemed too weak to be irritable. But my fingers held my knees harder, and my eyelids parted in time to see the eddies close upon the stone that had fallen midway between the two banks. With a sense of languid annoyance, I exerted myself so far as to turn my head and look for the intruder.

A little girl stood upon a flat stone surrounded by water, lying about a yard from the hither shore. Her left hand was filled with pebbles, and these she proceeded to fling, with extreme deliberation and unfeminine dexterity as far as she

could into the brook, waiting until the circle made by each had "dispersed itself to nought," before tossing in another. Every throw was made with the forecast of a philosopher, not with the reckless hilarity of the mere baby she looked to be. When both hands were emptied, she stood perfectly still, her fingers interlocked, still watching the gliding water.

At last she stooped as if impelled by a resistless temptation, gathering her frock about her that it might not dip in the stream, and made as if she would gather a handful of the shining gravel strewn about the base of the stone, and barely covered by the ripples. She leaned over so far that I expected to see her lose her balance, and undid the loose knot of legs and hands in readiness for the rescue should the accident occur. In another second she stood upright again, brushing the water from her finger-tips. Putting her hands behind her back, she remained stationary as before, gazing down upon the sungilt gravel-bed.

The grave wistfulness of the face now turned toward me interested me sufficiently to fix my attention upon her movements, and to keep me motionless in my covert of hazel bushes that she might not be frightened away by the discovery that she was not alone. She was, I judged, between six and seven years old; straight as a reed, with well-rounded figure and limbs, an oval face and brunette complexion, set off by a pink muslin frock and white apron. Her hair, dark and thick, was combed back from her forehead and bound with pink ribbon. Her hands, although tanned like a gyp-

sey's, were beautifully formed. She was no rustic, or forest child, I concluded promptly after a study of these "points," simple as was her dress and at home though she seemed on the border of the woodland stream. Nor was my mental query in watching her—"What is she looking at?" but, "What is she thinking of?"

The inharmonious cry of a cat-bird in the tree against which I leaned severed the chain of abstraction. She glanced around and saw me. A blush swept up to her hair, lighting the dark cheeks richly; then she bowed with serious tranquil grace that surprised me more than her appearance had; bounded lightly back to the bank, walked directly up to me, and offered her hand.

"Good-morning, sir! I hope you are better."

"How do you know that I have been sick?" asked I, smiling at her artless politeness.

"We heard there was a sick gentleman from the city boarding at Mr. Gaskin's house. And you are so thin and white I knew it must be you. I dare say you will be well very soon. Papa says this country is very healthy. I wouldn't worry about myself if I was in your place."

I smiled now because I could not retain my gravity under the quaint counselling.

"Thank you for your good wishes. I cannot be sure that the country air will do me good, but you are very kind to care about it at all. What were *you* worrying over, standing upon the rock down there and staring the water out of countenance?"

"I wasn't worrying." She managed the double *r* rather

awkwardly, a touch of baby *patois* that was odd in her grandmotherly mode of address. "I was only thinking hard. Don't you believe there must be the beautifullest kind of sand and gravel in heaven?"

I tried not to look amused under her questioning eyes.

"I don't know. I shouldn't like to say that there is, or is not. I never was there."

"*Course* not!" a touch of disdain in the solemn nod. "Nobody ever went to heaven and camed—*came*—back beceps" (except) "Moses and Elijah. They wouldn't have done it either only to see the dear Saviour. On the mountain, you remember. *I'm* pretty certain there must be loads and piles of sand and gravel in heaven, for they are just the nicest things in the world to play with, and mamma says I mustn't, without they are dry as bones."

"That is a little hard—isn't it?" said I, sympathizingly, for her visage expressed deep dejection. "I should say, now, that they were as clean as they are pretty."

She shook her wise little head.

"'Twon't do to take things from the looks of them. They get fearfully wet, you see, staying under the water, and they're nothing but common stones when they're dry. Ever so ugly, some of them. And I *sup*-pose 'twasn't quite proper for me to fill the lap of my nice white dress with them and carry them home to put into Aunt Evy's bowl. She can't walk so far, and I'd been telling her how they shone like all sorts of precious stones, and she said she had no doubt they were perfectly lovely! They were, too!"

The ruffles of her bib-apron trembled in the sigh that swelled her bosom.

"But mamma scolded—did she?" queried I.

She shrugged her shoulders and raised her eyebrows in a gesture that was irresistibly comic.

"Depends upon what kind of scolding you're used to! She said she would put me to bed, next time, and make me stay there all day. It is horrid to be put to bed in the daytime, in the summer, and hear the birds and chickens and children and even the ducks playing and singing out-of-doors. Mamma always does what she promises, so I can't touch *them*" —nodding backward at the gravel bed. "Besides I promised I wouldn't, and 'twould be a shame if she couldn't trust such a great girl to keep her word. I came awfully near forgetting though! I got my fingers right into the water before I remembered. Oh! how frightened I was! It is fearfully hard to do right—isn't it?"

"For wicked big boys, perhaps." I began to find her frankness contagious. "But I don't believe you often do wrong. You look like an amiable, well-behaved little girl. I can't think that you ever lose your temper, and say sharp or cross things."

Another shrug.

"*Don't* I, though? I got mad with Mary—that's our nurse, you know, this very morning, and called her an Irish *idiot*, and said I wished she hadn't ever been borned; that I didn't see what the Lord made that kind for. That was wicked—downright. And last week I *cursed* her."

"What!"

"I did! cursed her so dreadfully that she went to mamma about it. Mamma made me ask her pardon; papa laughed."

"Liberal ideas papa's must be respecting juvenile profanity!" I thought.

She went on. "He laughed when Mary wasn't looking at him, so's not to hurt her feelings I *sup*-pose. But wasn't she angry with me! She told mamma what I said was the worstest curse anybody could wish."

"What did you say?" curious to get at the phraseology of this terrific malediction. It was difficult to imagine that the lips I was looking at had ever been sullied by an oath.

"I said, 'Bad luck to the ship that brought you over!' It was very bad, I *sup*-pose, but she had thrown away the nest of sweet little field-mice Jo Bragdon found for me in the meadows, and she called them 'crayturs.' That's why I cursed her. I'd do it again!" kindling up fierily in eyes and color and doubling down her fingers forcibly upon her palms. "It was hateful!"

"I agree with you entirely. She ought to have been sunk with the ship. And this morning—what was the matter then?"

"It was the dearest, darlingest hop-toad you ever saw! I caught it last night and made it a bed of grass and cotton in an old cigar-box that the smell had gotten out of, and gave it a supper of flies and tied some old lace over the top to keep him from *smuddering*, and put it under my bed, far back against the wall, where he ought to have been safe. She

found it while I was in the barn-yard, digging worms for his breakfast. When I came back the box was empty."

Her voice faltered, and she winked fast two or three times.

"When I told her I should complain to mamma and make her send her away, she said I was enough to fret a saint, littering up a Christian's house with *bastes*. Then"—the corners of her mouth twitching in a sly smile, while her eyelids drooped shamefacedly—"I called her a baste herself and said that I *dis*tested her. Mary can be a good girl, but dear me! she is very *twy*ing sometimes!" with her knowing shake of the head.

"You are a funny little lady!"

I cannot convey by written words any adequate impression of the mixture of womanliness, *naïveté* and childish naughtiness that excited my mirthful amazement. It was as if the plump-breasted robin, fussily busy with her young ones overhead, had hopped to my feet and entertained me with a history of her daily life, trials, and peccadilloes.

"Where do you live?" I made so free as to inquire.

"In town, when we are at home. We are staying at grandpa's a long time this summer because baby is cutting her eye-teeth. I like the country above everything, but you can't be perfectly contented anywhere, and there are so many temptations! There's sand, now! not the gravelly sort, but smooth land-sand. You wouldn't believe what elegant houses and fences and cas*tels* anybody can make out of it. When it's damp, you understand. 'Twon't stay fixed if it's dry; but mamma says dry sand is clean, and wet sand dirty. There's not a morsel of fun in that."

I uncoiled my limbs and straightened my spine.

"I think you and I together can manage it. I will bring the sand up here on these dry, broad rocks, and you can build your houses. I'll see that the sand is not wet enough to soil your dress."

"Good! good!" clapping her hands. "I had no i-de-a you were such a nice gentleman!" dropping into the gravely confidential. "You looked so dull and sulky when I first saw you all crooked up against the tree."

At the water's edge she stayed me.

"Aren't you afraid you will take cold dabbling in the water and handling damp sand? Robbie came near having the croup last week because he played in the well-trough and got his apron and sleeves all wet. You've been sick, you know."

"I will be very careful," I promised, with admirable sedateness. "If I should get sick you can come and nurse me."

"I will!" she engaged, in good faith.

Our joint labors engrossed all our energies after that. A brave fortification grew into shape and just proportions, upon a table-rock we dubbed, at my suggestion, Gibraltar. There were walls and a moat, and a birch-bark drawbridge, scarp, counter-scarp, barbicans, bomb-proofs, and towers with twig guns cut of suitable size and proportions by my useful pen-knife. The barracks within the defences were models of compact architecture. Muskets were stacked artistically in the court-yard, and a few sentinels, whittled out of pine

sticks, mounted guard stiffly enough in convenient proximity to these.

For a flag we had to content ourselves with a tall stick topped by a cardinal flower.

"It is *magnissifent!*" cried my fellow-builder, stepping back some paces to take in the *tout ensemble.* "I thought I could build tolerable houses and things, but you make me ashamed of my poor little affairs. I say! you *will* be my friend, won't you? And come down here every day for a little while? You see," coming up close to me, taking my hand between her coaxing fingers, and talking very fast, "I have nobody worth talking about to play with. Aunt Evy has gone to the Springs with Uncle George. My big sister is too big, even when she's at home, and my big brother lives away off in Cincinnati and has got a baby of his own. Baby Evy is just learning to walk, and Robby is only two-and-a-half, besides having the croup and can't run about beceps where the ground is even and dry. We could have jolly times—you and me—and, indeed, I will be ever so good."

I passed my hand over her hair; searched the depths of such eyes as I have never seen in another face. I had scarcely noticed until then how rarely beautiful they were. Gray, with inky rings edging the irids that might have been the encircling shadow of the long, black lashes, they were fathomless springs of softness and light.

"Go through a fellow 's if she knowed what he was thinkin' about, let alone what he's sayin'," said a rough yeoman of them, once.

A page of word-painting would not have described them better.

They enforced a truthful answer from me, free from equivocation and banter.

"I shall be glad if you will take me for your friend. Every morning, when I am well enough and the weather is pleasant, I will be here to meet you."

A horn rang out shrill and importunate from the direction of the farm-house.

I pulled out my watch incredulously. It was twelve o'clock.

## CHAPTER II.

### AILSIE DARLING.

FOUND, next morning, a less precipitous path from the Gaskin homestead to the "crick," as Ezra called it, than that into which I had stumbled the preceding day. It was a faintly-worn trail winding around a shoulder of Maple Hill, and skirting the water for some distance below the trysting-rock. Advancing quietly by this, I perceived that I was not first at the rendezvous, and was at my "friend's" elbow before she suspected my approach.

She was bending forward with a sort of restrained eagerness in attitude and profile, that warned me not to speak or move abruptly. Directly beneath Gibraltar was a miniature cove, deeper and darker than the main stream. Pendant grasses fringed it, and the stones lining it were green with moss. Beyond was a patch of water-lilies. Stooping to look over the child's head at whatever it might be that riveted her notice, I saw the reflection of her intent face upon the pool, and that it changed as mine fell beside it. She turned partly around, hand uplifted, every feature alive with excitement and welcome. With the other hand she pointed to the shadiest recess of the cove, where lay a fine

brook-trout. A chance pencil of light refracted by the sparkling mirror that held our faces in almost unwavering lines, struck athwart his spotted back, shimmered down his silvery sides. Green moss and brown opaline water were the background on which he shone in royal beauty, motionless as a painted king with all his regalia on.

The blood tingled to my fingers' ends as I fancied what it would be to me—and to him—had I my trusty rod in hand. In one second I lived through it all—the poise, the throw, the rise, the strike, the play—the landing! My breath came in a quick, sharp respiration that cut the air audibly. The mirror was dashed into fragments; the gleam of living jewels—or of fire—shot the depths of the pool. Then, through the stilling surface we saw green velvet cushion and curtaining water, vacant.

"You've scared him away!" said my companion, catching her breath in her turn, "I've been watching him this ever-so-long. Wasn't he a beauty?"

I assented heartily, adding—"Do you often see that kind of fish about here?"

"You won't catch them if I say, 'Yes?'" screwing up one side of her face in a teasing grimace.

"I do not promise that. Trout were made to be caught. You like to eat them, don't you?"

"Not if they are acquaintances of mine, like him," pointing to the pool. "He knows me quite well. He wouldn't have run away for—may-be—two hours, if nobody else had come. He isn't fond of strangers. I'll tell you something,"

sinking her voice to a mysterious whisper. "He is a fairy prince, changed to a fish by a wicked fairy. At the end of a hundred days, a good fairy will come along, and touch him with her wand, and he will jump out of the water in a white satin coat all buttoned up with scarlet diamonds,—didn't you see them? a double row!"

"What if I should be the good fairy?" I suggested. "I have a magic wand, bound and tipped with silver, almost long enough to reach across this creek, that I am positive would bring him, at one leap, to land."

She had started up, and away from me, red indignation upon brow and neck.

"If you do! if you do!" she protested, stamping her foot, and eyeing me with aversion. "I will never forgive you, never! never!"

The tears rushed up and put out the fires. She collapsed into a heap upon the grass, sobbing that she had not believed I could be so cruel! and to her precious tame trout that knew and loved her! She thought I looked good and kind.

"My dear little friend," I was fain to plead on bended knee, "listen to me! If you will stop crying, I will promise never to fish in this pool, or on this side of the stream, another time. Do you hear me?"

She nodded behind the white apron, now nearly wet through.

"Tell all your particular acquaintances among the trout to wear a pink ribbon around their throats when they go out walking."

She laughed between her sobs.

"Fish don't walk. They swim. They are not *amphibus* like bullfrogs."

"When they go out swimming, then, and I will never try to catch them—only touch my hat to them and go on."

Down went the apron, and she was rummaging in her pocket, drawing out, first a handkerchief, next a doll's cape, some printed slips cut from newspapers, a stumpy cedar pencil, a pair of blunt-edged scissors, finally a slender roll of paper, from which she carefully extracted the object she sought.

"See what I have! Mamma gave me the ribbon. I made the flag all by my lone self!"

I could credit it when I examined the treasure—two square inches of red, white and blue ribbon, put together with an unnecessary quantity of irregular stitches, and fastened more securely than neatly to an old knitting-needle. I praised the tri-color warmly, and we sealed our reconciliation by planting it upon the chief tower of Gibraltar, in place of the withered cardinal flower.

"It took me an immense time to make it!" observed the seamstress surveying it with intensest complacency. "And how I *did* prick my fingers!"

Indeed, as I now perceived, there were many red specks dotting the seams, indicating these as the line of battle.

"Mary bothered me, asking what I was making. As if I would tell her! Such a chatterbox as that girl is! I think, sometimes, she will wear me out entirely! Do you *always* do as you'd be done by?"

"Not always, I am afraid," confessed I meekly.

"Nor I neither," in ingenuous discouragement. "Yet I suppose everybody ought to; for,

> "You know, my dear, the Bible says
> That you should always do
> To others as you would that *they*
> Should likewise do to *you*."

She chanted it in a nasal sing-song, suggestive of disgust with the lame machinery of the "poem," or weariness of having heard it so often.

"Sounds easy—don't it? Maybe you'd better try it, that's all."

To win her from the inclement mood into which she was likely to lapse if one might judge from tone and pout, I asked: "Do you like to learn verses?"

"To read poetry, do you mean? Better than anything else under the sun! Would you mind my telling you something I was saying to myself, when you came just now? I found it in one of mamma's books. There are lots of other beautiful pieces in there. Its just the very picture of my pond here, if you make believe a little in some parts of it. Listen if it isn't!"

She was upon her feet, her electric face shining and quivering, one foot braced against a projection of the rock overhanging the pool. Her hat had been tossed upon the ground, and her very hair seemed to gleam and stir with her animated action.

I had expected a jingle of nursery rhymes—Mrs. Barbauld at the best; but to my astonishment she rushed into Percival's "Coral Grove:"

> "Deep in the waves is a coral grove
> Where the purple mullet and gold-fish rove.

("Trout's all the same, you know. 'Least 'twill do just as well, only 'twouldn't have come out right in the verse, I *suppose.*)

> There the sea-flower spreads its leaves of blue
> That never are wet with falling dew,
> But in bright and changeful beauty shine
> Far down in the green and glassy brine.

("Isn't that exactly like? Right down there—don't you see? where my prince was lying?)

> The floor is of sand, like the mountain drift
> And the pearl-shells spangle the flinty snow—

("That isn't quite so true, for mine has green and brown stones in the bottom. But only hear this!)

> The water is calm and still below
> For the winds and waves are absent there,
> And the sands are bright as the stars that glow
> In the mo-ti-on-less fields of upper air.
> There, with its waving blades of green,
> The sea-flag streams through the silent water,
> And the crimson leaf of the dulse is seen
> To blush like a banner bathed in slaughter—

("I knew how to per-nounce that word because it rhymes with 'water.')

There—

(swinging her arm to-and-fro)

—with a light and easy motion
The fan-coral sweeps through the clear, deep sea,
And the yellow and scarlet tufts of ocean
Are bending like corn on the upland lea.

("Oh! can't you see them when you shut your eyes!")
She closed hers, clasped her hands, and swayed gently from side to side, while reciting the next four lines, her rapt face raised to the sunlight.

"And life in rare and beautiful forms
Is sporting amid those bowers of stone,
And is safe when the wrathful spirit of storms
Has made the top of the waves his own.
And—

(throwing both arms widely abroad, her eyes dark and forehead frowning)

—when the ship from his fury flies
And the my-ri-ad voices of ocean roar,
When the wind-god frowns in the murky skies
And demons are waiting the wreck on shore,—
*Then*—

("Did you ever hear anything exquisiter than this?" sinking her voice almost to a whisper, and caressing each syllable as it glided from her lips—)

—far below in the peaceful sea
The purple mullet and gold-fish rove,
Where the waters murmur tranquilly
Through the bending twigs of the coral grove."

She sat down fairly spent with excitement, but radiant, and fell to work, brushing out, with a hemlock twig, the sand that had slidden from the wall of the fortress into the moat.

"That's what *I* call poetry! none of your babyish nonsense!"

"I call it poetry, too, and of the finest kind," replied I, as naturally as I could, while scrutinizing her with a mingling of admiration and apprehension. The creature was uncanny, while she stood on the rock; possessed, shaken, rarefied (I mean it, for she reminded me of luminous air) by the spirit of poesy, absolutely seeing, "when she shut her eyes," all that the words portrayed. There had been tears on her lashes as she concluded. One had rolled from her cheek to the hand holding the hemlock broom. Yet in less time than it took her to twinkle them away, she was again very child, intent upon her playthings, the rare and beauteous forms of ocean-life forgotten in the temporary solicitude of keeping the mimic trenches clean.

I made an effort to revive the vanished fire.

"Did you say that you learned poetry for yourself? Can you read?"

Her eyes were stretched wide in haughty surprise.

"I—should—hope—so!" emphatically slow. "Why, I was six years old last Christmas-Eve, and I could read any-

where in the Bible by the time I was five. That is—'most anywhere—beceps, of course, those chapters full of jaggedy words in Chronikillers and Deut-er-er-on-o-my ; I never could understand why they were put into the Bible. I'm glad I wasn't one of the men who had to write those parts. No—nor the first chapter of Matthew. But people had learned how to be sensibler about such things before they wrote the New Testament. There are only two chapters of names in *it!*"

"Who taught you all this?"

"How to read—do you mean? Mamma, most times—sometimes, Aunt Evy ; I read and spell to Aunt Evy every day when we are at home. Papa did not quite like my learning to read, but mamma was obliged to let me do it—I was such a restless mischief when I was little. When I am eight years old, I am to begin French and music, she says. Papa doesn't approve of any kind of lessons for me, I believe. I don't know why."

I imagined that I did, and altogether "approved" of papa's judgment.

The moat was cleared by this time, and the flag stood "straight out," as she said satisfiedly, partly because there was a slight breeze, chiefly because its "set" upon the pole was such that it could not have drooped in a dead calm. All having been pronounced ship-shape at the fort, my restless little dryad forthwith produced from her teeming brain the "splendidest plan that had popped into her head last night."

We were to build a bower in the woods and "maybe—who

knows?—live there altogether some day. In case grandpa's house were to burn down, or blow over—or be anything-elsed. 'Tenny rate 'twould be derlicious in hot weather." She "had heard of countries where people lived in bush-houses the year round—for all the world, like a picnic." There was a picture in a book, at home, of a Bunyan tree. Or was that the name of the man that wrote "Pilgrim's Progress" in jail for preaching the gospel? Any way, it was something like that. A tree, where the roots grew all the way down from the limbs. 'Twas too comical to see the little ones that had just started down! And people were cooking dinner and sleeping and dancing and saying their prayers under them as comfortable and cunning as could be. There was a grape-vine back there, on the hill, that looked exactly like a what-do-you-call-it tree. Would it tire me to step up and look at it?

Of course I went; equally of course, I lent my advice, my long legs and arms, and my knife, to the enterprise of converting a Yankee grape-vine wandering over a tough mountain-ash into the similitude of an Indian banyan. I persuaded myself that I got a crick in the neck and aches in shoulders and back out of lazy good-nature; that I was too inert to cross the eager petitioner. I believe now, that I should have tried to heave ton boulders into the creek had she expressed a wish to have a stone bridge built across to the other side, so beguiled was I already by her witching imperialism. She worked harder than I did, picking up and bearing away the cut boughs as they dropped under my knife.

There were gaps in the roof and sides, which the inconsiderate vine had neglected to cover. It was necessary that we should remedy the defects in Nature's architecture, by weaving otherwise useless streamers across the apertures, and binding them in their new places, if we would have our bower even sun-tight, to say nothing of its ability to shed the rain.

Out from her wonderful pocket came a bunch of string, without which she had foreseen that "we could not possibly get along." She "could hold the branches while I tied them." I could not hint at, scarcely think of fatigue, while the earnest little face was upturned to note each step in the operation, and the lights through the shaken vines danced over it. She spoke but seldom, while we were actually at work, holding the stems with firm fingers and as firm a set of the childish features that meant business, and business alone. Dome and walls finished, I was bidden to rest awhile upon "the seat"—a big stone, so near to the ash that I could find in its trunk some relief to my strained spinal column.

She stood, regarding me, for a moment, in sorrowful surprise, divining from my countenance and motions that I had over-exerted myself.

"I am sorry I asked you to build the bower to-day," she said gently.

"It has not hurt me; I shall be all right again, directly."

"If you wouldn't mind lending me your knife," she resumed, persuasively. "I will be careful not to break or lose it."

"Don't cut your fingers!" was my caution in passing it over; "it is very sharp."

"It would be good-for-nothing if it was dull."

With that, she retired from sight, but not out of hearing.

I was willing to rest. I was really very tired, and the June day was slumberous. There was a plantation of young hemlocks and pines hard by, and the warm air extracted their resins to blend with the smell of the bleeding grape-vine and trampled ferns. The ripple and tinkle of the water were soothing, not dulling, as on yesterday. A rustling in the thickets on my left, and the sound of a child's voice singing low, but very sweetly to herself, told me that I was not in a sylvan solitude. The rustling came nearer, now and then, and I was drowsily aware that some sort of forest upholstery was going on at the back of the booth, and that the sweet crooning was intermitted when the mistress of the bower entered, —chiming in again with the lullaby of the water, when she withdrew in the direction of the evergreen covert. By-and-by, I aroused myself to hearken to snatches of what she warbled. It was one tune, sung again and again, shaping itself, sometimes, into words, then subsiding into a musical murmur; again, ceasing suddenly, as she tugged at, or cut into the twigs she gathered. It was not a child's song. I learned, later in our acquaintanceship, that it was a favorite of "Aunt Evy's," and that the little niece had liked it the more after happening upon the words in that "one of mamma's books" which had also given her the "Coral Grove."

"Faintly flow, thou falling river,
Like a dream that dies away,
Down the ocean gliding—"

The hummed cadence flowed on, but the breeze gave me no words until another visit was made to the bower, and the fleet footsteps went back to the hemlock plantation.

> "Roses bloom and then they wither,
> Cheeks are bright, then fade and die."

"Fade and die! Fade and die!" The echoes from the opposite bank took up the strain, repeating faithfully a peculiar undulating cadenza with which the second line ended, the sound melting into the silences of the distance upon the word "die," with an effect I remembered for many a day thereafter. I waited for the recurrence of this passage with pensive pleasure, straining my ears to hearken for the faintest vibration of the summer air, among the hills on either side of the gorge, yet without a thought of the "drifting out" that had been the refrain of heart and pulses yesterday.

Not that I was awakening from the lethargic reaction which was the dregs of the fever. This I would not admit, so obstinate had been my persuasion that I could never again be quite alive. But I did acknowledge that I had turned in my sleep; that the gentle relaxation of the system after my recent exercise was some removes from the lassitude I had been content should swallow up will and energy. Perhaps it was one of the delights of convalescence of which doctors and friends had prated to me.

A hand touched my arm; warm, pure breath fanned my cheek.

"Won't you sit on the sofa? It is ever so much softer than that rough old rock."

Which had been "our seat," a little while before.

The indefatigable dryad had clipped and piled pine and hemlock twigs into a mound at that side of the bower facing the entrance and the creek. It was an elastic, fragrant cushion I was ashamed to rest upon when I remarked her flushed face, and hair damp with perspiration.

"How you have worked!" I said, in self-reproachful gratitude, "I did not dream that you were doing this for me. I thought you were playing."

"It was better than playing!" the white teeth shining in her glee as she capered around me, too much elated to keep still for a second. "I heard papa and Uncle George talking about the lumbermen's beds, away off in Maine, and I said to myself then that I would try to make one, some day. Wasn't it lucky that high stump came to be just there, to make a back for the sofa? But" stopping short in her waltz and joyous talk, and sinking into plaintive regrets—"I couldn't get near enough for a bed. Though I did cut all I could reach. And the lounge is very short."

"We will call it a tabouret. That means a small sofa. There is plenty of room for you and me," drawing her gently to my side. "And we don't expect company yet awhile—not until we are fairly settled to housekeeping."

"Not any time!" she protested. "Beceps papa. He's coming on Saturday."

That "beceps" always provoked me to a smile. It was a

singular slip of the nimble tongue, and reminded me, as did her valiant but sometimes ineffectual wrestle with polysyllables, what a baby she was in age and size. Yet I did not put my arm about her when she nestled down by me on the tabouret. If I had, I was as positive then as after I knew her better, that she would have arisen and walked away. There was a delicacy of dignity in her bearing and look, with all her freedom of speech, that would have taught the rudest boor to respect her inborn ladyhood. It may sound absurd when one takes into consideration her "six years last Christmas Eve," and my manly majority, already twenty-four hours old, but I would not have dared take her on my knee, or kiss her. The right to hold her hand or stroke her hair was the utmost extent of familiarity that would have been vouchsafed to her chosen "friend," at this stage of our intercourse. Fortunately for the perpetuity of our intimacy I gleaned this fact from intuition. I have seen her teach the lesson to others by the manifestation of hauteur they could not mistake for a childish freak.

"He spends much of his time in town, does he not?" I asked after her last observation.

"All the week from Monday morning till Saturday at dinner-time. It is perfectly dreadful! I thought, at first, that I couldn't *possibly* live through it. It's bad enough now."

"You love him very dearly, then?"

"Love him! I would be burned up alive, chopped into little bits with a hatchet, and never say a word—if he wanted me to, or it would do him any good!"

She uttered it in a subdued tone, without gesture, but the concentrated passion of a woman's heart was in the intense face. I pray never to see it in another as young. I shivered, —and chided the ridiculous fancies that made me do it the next second.

"That would be the last thing he would want you to do," I returned, jocularly. "You could not love him, if it were possible for him to be so cruel."

"I should love papa if he beat me to death. Like the little boy of An-ti-och I read of in the History of the Martyrs. They whipped him until he died, because he loved Jesus. It was a rough way of getting to heaven, but I don't suppose that mattered much after he got there, and it didn't last long. My papa is never cruel to anybody, and he loves me almost as much as I do him—" returning to the livelier theme. "He is the very bestest man ever was. I am going to marry him when I am grown!"

"Marry him!" I echoed laughing.

She caught me up, defiantly

"Course I shall! I must have a husband, you know, and I love him a thousand times better than I ever can anybody else. Mamma will be getting sort of old by that time, and he will want me to ride and walk with him."

"But won't he be getting old, himself, too?"

"Papa! He's so big and strong, I think he'll live a hundred years. I hope so, or that GOD will let me die when he does. I've often thought that would be a nice plan, for all of a family to die in a bunch, and there wouldn't be anybody

left to be sorry. My sister Minnie died, oh, a long time ago, and mamma takes me in her lap now, on Sunday evenings, and talks to me about her, and the tears roll down her face to mine, without her knowing that she is crying."

This appeared to my inexperience an unwise indulgence of maternal grief, when the recipient of the sacred confidence was the sensitive, imaginative daughter who already talked of the Martyr's agony as a short road to heaven, and of death as preferable to bereavement.

I broke the chain of conversation with a snap.

"This is Thursday, and as papa does not come until Saturday, I shall hope to see you here to-morrow. It is time I was going up to my dinner, now, if I do not want Mrs. Gaskin to scold about my being late. Mamma will be wondering where you are, too. Good-bye. Isn't it queer that we have not thought to ask one another's names? Mine is Barry Haye."

"My name is Ailsie," she returned in prompt simplicity.

"Elsie?" I repeated.

"No, A, i, l, s, i, e! Mamma had a dear friend whose father was a Scotchman, and I was named for her. Papa is Mr. Darling. So, I am Ailsie Darling."

## CHAPTER III.

### RAIN UPON THE ROOF.

IT was colorless light, and late in coming, that crept through the windows of my eastward chamber on Friday morning. The *sauce piquante* of Ezra's breakfast was the gratulation, oft-repeated and dwelt upon with much chuckling and smacking of lips, that "the early hay in Squire's south medder he'd been so stuck-up about, was cut yestidday, every spear on it," while his—Ezra's,—would not be ready for the scythe "afore middle o' next week."

"That's what comes o' book farming," responded his helpmeet. "To hear Squire talk you'd think ther' was a year o' corn into every grain o' dust if a person would only read up faithful on agricultoore, and chimistry and sech-like fol-de-rols. Its jist as well he should be learned a lesson by the ways o' Providence, wunst in a while. He has it easy enough, a sight too easy for growth in grace, most times."

"'The ox knoweth his owner and the ass his master's crib!' piped the grand-dame, mumbling and mouthing over her "rye 'n Injun" mess. "Deary me! my jints ache like

'twas going to be fallin' weather. And the smoke drawed down the kitchen chimbley for quite a spell this mornin'. How's the wind, Ezry?"

"Straight out east. Couldn't be wuss fur them as is foru'd with their grass. All sorts o' signs of all-day rain. Look at the chickens," pointing through a window that commanded an unappetizing view of the barn-yard. "If ever you see 'em a-stragglin' 'round regardless-like on a dampish mornin' like this, look out for a stiddy rain, and 'bundance of it. 'What's the odds?' sez Mr. Chicken. 'I'm bound for to git my feathers wet afore this 'ere job is through with. Mought jist 's well take it easy and git my pickin's reg'lar 'cording to custom.' That's about the ticket, Mr. Haye."

I had not seen him so facetious before since my arrival at his house. His play of wit seemed to astonish and exhilarate himself. He laughed boisterously, and shook his fist toward the window with the next sentence:

"There's the first drops, sure 's you're born and I ain't a teapot! What's the time o' day, ma?" his pet name for the wife who had never borne him a child. "Seven-an-a-quarter, sure 's gun's iron! I sed so! 'Rain afore seven, clear afore 'leven,' is a rule what works both ways. Another cup o' coffee, ma. Seein' as how *my* grass ain't down I kin take life comfortable."

The extent to which he gloated over his neighbor's discomfiture and his own immunity from damage was equally novel and revolting to me. I did a little sum in mental and moral arithmetic while I turned the square inch of horny

steak, fried in lard, that graced the centre of my plate, in quest of a corner vulnerable to knife, and, problematically, to teeth. If the wetting of one field of the Squire's hay afforded him such exquisite enjoyment, how near to the seventh heaven would the destruction of the prosperous man's house and barns by lightning, and the death of his family "in a bunch," as Ailsie put it, raise the excellent Christian with the Old Testament prænomen? In my comparative ignorance of the characteristics of the genus Rusticus, I was so foolish as to fancy that such outspoken and malicious envy had its root in a personal or family feud. I was to find out at my leisure and to my bewilderment that prosperity, especially the affluence which is the result of intelligent enterprise, is always a noisome stench in Hodge's nostrils, and resented as a pointed reflection upon his estate of intellectual and social underlinghood, which cannot be condoned or forgiven.

"Squire's a main smart man," maundered the old mother, with the fatal facility possessed in a supereminent degree by superannuated grandmothers of saying the wrong thing in the nick of time. "A proper nice man. So's his wife. Emily Barrow she was. Ther' ain't no sech purty girls these days as ther' used to was. Well, well! Time flies and the poor ye have always with you. She come of a prime family, did Em'ly. I guess none on 'em 'll disgrace the name. She allus had a bright eye in her head, and a sweet word in her mouth—had Em'ly."

"Ther' ain't many things easier did nor to be pious 'n

pop'lar when a person's got both their pockets full," pronounced her son.

"Nor to carry yer head high when you hain't never hed no trouble to bring it low," was his wife's appendix. "I hain't no opinion of high-flyers, no matter how civil-spoken they be. 'A haughty sperrit before a fall.' Ther' ain't one of them Darlings but is too high-strung for comfort."

"'Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward,'" quoted the irrelevant grand-dame.

The Gaskin memory was an arsenal of Scripture texts, used more frequently in the devil's work of "all uncharitableness" than in any other.

"The Darlings!" The obnoxious Squire was probably the "Grandpapa" at whose house Ailsie was spending the summer. I checked my motion to quit the table and give up the matutinal meal as an ignominious failure; helped myself to another mottled saleratus biscuit and kept my ears open. My meeting with Ailsie had been the only break in the dreary calm of my country sojourn, and whatever related to her family history could not be devoid of interest. Even the backbiting chit-chat of the trio, while it tended Darlingward, was some variety in the boredom of a rainy day in-doors.

"Ther's the oldest son—Pressley—now. But maybe you know him, Mr. Haye?" The hostess suspended her scalpel pending the appeal to me. "Anyway, its likely you must 'a' heard of Pressley Darling, livin' in the same city. He's somethin' in the hullsale line—I can't rightly say what. I think, though, its woollings."

"West Ingy merchant and emporter!" corrected her husband. "That's as nigh as wimmen gits to most things."

I was learning another thing about underbred ignoramuses, and may jot it down here as a rule of universal application so far as I have had an opportunity of judging. The less a man knows, of and for himself—the more nearly he approximates the reasoning faculties of the lower animals—the more contemptuous is his estimate of the mental powers of women, especially of those belonging by the accident of birth, or the blunder of marriage, to his bestial estate.

"Ezry don't set no kind o' store by women," observed his mother, with a feeble giggle. "His sainted pa was jest so—allers! But as I tell 'em when they're too hard with us, men would make a poor shift 'thout us, come feedin' time. Ah, well! Holdin' faith and a good conscience. *That's* the p'int, Mr. Haynes. My poor mother used to say the same thing when she was alive, jest the same. She was a good woman, my mother was. Ther's nothin' truer than that they shall run that read, Mr. Haynes."

"Mr. *Haye*, mother!" said the shrewish daughter-in-law. "And between you and Ezry, he hain't had no chance to answer my question."

I made reply that I had never seen or heard of Mr. Pressley Darling to the best of my knowledge, but that the city was a large place in which we might both live for many years without meeting.

"Guess he ain't sech a big bug as he'd hev people think," grunted the gratified Ezra. "For all he swells 'round so

when he comes to the country. A tadpole 'll make more splash in a mud-puddle than a bull-frog will into a mill-pond. It's likely you'll run agin him somewheres this summer. He ain't nowise sociable with us plain folks, but he may pay you some 'tention, seein' you're one of his kind-like. The hull kit 'n' boozle on 'em air stayin' to the Squire's for quite a spell."

"Hev you found out yit whether they're payin' board or not?" questioned the wife eagerly.

"Stan's to reason they'd orter," was the answer. "I was kinder soundin' Jabe Wyckoff 'bout it, last night. He's been workin' there some considerable this spring and summer. He 'lowed he'd never seen no money pass between em, nor heerd no talk o' bills, but that don't prove nothin'! They're a desprit close-mouthed set."

The "stiddy rain" predicted by Ezra and his intellectual peer, "Mr. Chicken," lasted all that day and the next, and my state of body and mind had, by Saturday night, passed over the jagged bounds of desperation into the mire and darkness of despair. I had read such books as my sister had packed in spare corners of my trunk to keep other properties from "riding" to their own damage and that of their neighbors, until I was nearly blind. They were, for the most part, light literature of the frothiest order, selected, I imagined, first, because my mind was considered to be in need of dissipation and distraction; secondly, because pamphlets were less likely to tumble my shirt-bosoms and rub holes in my cloth Sunday-suit than stiff-backed and sharp edged vol-

umes. Two days of this cooling diet so effectually dissipated such powers of thought as had survived six weeks of fever and six days of country recreation, that I was in danger of permanent distraction.

I made no pretensions to "keeping the run" of the various stories. Plots (if there were any), characters, incidents and *dénouements*, were, with respect to the pulpy mass of my brain, like Miss Phelps's Bible Class scholar's ideas of the blessed inhabitants of heaven, "floating around loose somehow, like jubejube paste." My room, bestrewed with yellow and purple-covered "novels," than which nothing, it seemed to me, could be more stale; with the sullen roll of the rain upon the slanting roof, and the sometime fast, sometime deliberate drip from the leaky trough under the eaves upon the top of the porch beneath my window, was yet many degrees preferable to the scenes and society below-stairs. I have never marvelled at the sterility and slowness of the average country mind since that rainy Friday and Saturday.

"How do you employ and amuse yourselves in wet weather?" I had asked of Ezra, the first day.

"Oh, it's 'cordin as it falls!" I had not the remotest conception of his meaning. "We mostly keep a-potterin' 'round."

I discovered what that signified before my forty-eight hour term of confinement expired.

Mrs. Ezra did much of her pottering in the garret—a space between the chamber-ceilings which sloped on one side, and the roof-tree which sloped on both sides—a space lighted

by a triangular window in each gable, and which, on these dully-illumined days, must have been nearly dark when one stood equi-distant from the casements. A space that smelled so mightily of old leather, onions, moth-eaten woollens, dried apples, dried pumpkins and dry rot, that overpowering whiffs shot in through my key-hole whenever the garret-door—not five feet off and exactly opposite—was opened, and it stood wide all the while Mrs. Ezra was overhauling the hid treasures therein entombed.

The grand-dame—Ezra and his spouse called her "the old lady" invariably in speaking of her—pottered in the kitchen, the fire being "comfortin' to her bones of a damp day," she informed me with unflinching regularity three times *per diem*, and on as many other occasions as I chanced to encounter her. She rattled in cupboard corners with a very quilly turkey-wing to get out the dust; rattled inside the pots with a stick tied to a wet rag, and rattled the covers in putting them on, rattled plate upon plate, and dish against dish; always dropped the stove-covers upon the hearth before rattling them into their places; knocked down the shovel and tongs twenty times a day, and made so much rattling in getting them again into position that one might have suspected her of practicing tongs-and-bones for an Ethiopian serenade; rattled chairs over tables and tables over the floor; broom, dust-pan, scrubbing-pail aud brush over everything, until I, condemned to hear all through the thin flooring, was diabolically tempted to wish that the death-rattle might make a seasonable abatement of the nuisance. I could have borne it

better, if she had not talked to herself incessantly, when alone. Once, passing along the entry on my way to the well for a pitcher of cool water, I saw as well as heard her through the kitchen-door which was ajar. Her head was tied up in a blue cotton handkerchief and she had on a chocolate calico gown. Her glasses were on the tip of her nose, and while she scoured a milk-pail with rattling nails and knuckles, she jabbered in this fashion :

"Myry Coles said so, and she'd orter know ; Myry was a spry girl's ever was. Righteousness and truth meet together. My ole granny always held out there weren't no manner of use in putting a mite o' salt into soft soap. I never see sich another to make butter and hive bees. Ontil the land be des'late and the cities 'thout inhabitant. Ther's no gittin' 'round comfortin' Scripter like *that*, let Ezry say what he likes. They might talk to me 'till Doomsday 'n' nobody shouldn't make me say 's how blue vit'ril ain't equinomical fur to dye yarn and carpet-rags. Avide the a'pearance of evil. Hannah Jones—she was Dominie Vanderdonk's third wife. His second was a Bristow. The fust was a Dykeman. He didn't get no money with none but *her*."

Nobody ever intimated that the old housewife was insane. She was reputed among her kinsfolk and congeners to be "wonderful smart for her years." But, as I regained my chamber and the split-bottomed chair that gave me the choice between the potato-field on my left and the big barn on my right—through the two-leaved doors of which I could see Ezra "pottering about" the dusky interior in his shirt-

sleeves—I entered upon a serious and not inspiriting calculation of the causes which had induced the habit of senile maundering that made her grotesque instead of being the object of affectionate veneration. Cramped by her surroundings and by the fact of her womanhood, that by which her husband and sons and their masculine associates "set no store"—the radius of thought and ambition had narrowed yearly, until what might have grown into autumnal fulness and beauty had become a shrivelled husk in which the dead kernels of ideas lay loosely, without order or sequence. Poor old soul! what wonder that everything else rattled under her touch? Her son would be no better at the same age. His piety, by which he did "set store," being an Elder in an orthodox Church—would be as absurdly formulated.

All this time the rain poured steadily upon the house-roof, spattered, gurgled and gushed through the break in the wooden gutter exactly above my window, down upon the shingled porch. Beyond potato-patch and barn-yard the landscape was but semi-visible by reason of the drooping veil of cloud, and sheets of fine mist, quickly succeeded by others when they broke over the earth under the superincumbent weight of moisture. I am not ashamed to confess my utter demoralization, or how well considered was the vow I then and there committed to the register of memory, that I would abjure farm-houses and the denizens thereof, for the brief remainder of my unnaturally worthless existence. Had I been but a degree stronger in body, and, as a consequence, in moral courage, or had my city home been more

alluring, I should have fled incontinently by Saturday morning's stage, and braved my father's wrath at the violation of my tacit pledge, to give country air a fair trial. I ought to be ashamed to own that I called the longing for the sprightly companionship that had enlivened two forenoons of the week "puerile," judged myself to have sunk very low in the scale of reason and taste, for thinking that the Gaskin homestead itself might be endurable even in wet weather, were Ailsie one of the inmates.

Saturday night came at last. I had despaired of ever seeing it, a dozen times that day, and I went to bed early, to be kept awake for hours by the rattling "rain upon the roof," and the noisier water-spout above my window. I seemed to have dozed but a few minutes in a discursive miserable manner, when the rising sun shot a volley of gold-tipped arrows between my eyelids. It was Sunday morning, fresh and glorious, but so wet in meadow and footpath, so miry as to highways, that neither I nor the Gaskins ventured beyond the yard-gate in the forenoon. My sister had slipped in some religious periodicals and papers, furnished doubtless by my step-mother, among the novels. I nodded over a batch of these at one end of the porch shaded by the "Matrimony-vine," while Ezra snored outright and outrageously in his arm-chair at the other, *Zion's Herald and Gospel Trumpet*, spread over his face to keep off the flies. The "women-folks," Ezra's nomenclature for mother and wife, meanwhile clashed and clattered over the roaring hot cooking-stove, getting up the "big dinner" of the week.

It was past three o'clock, and the afternoon, although warm, still held the freshness of the two-days' storm, when I strolled down the path skirting the high-shouldered hill capped by the farm-house. The maple wood was cool, and fragrant with the smell of the soaked earth and bush undergrowth. The pines and hemlocks were still and dim as cathedral aisles before matins. The swollen creek ran noiselessly over the hidden stones, in quest of the unknown river. The rock on which I had first seen Ailsie was under water, and only to be located by the swirling eddies about it. Her placid pool was a muddy sluggish maelstrom, in which fifty trout might hide. The fortifications of Gibraltar were a gray expanse of ruins, hardly a furrow remaining to mark the site of glacis, barbican, or tower. I said "ridiculous!" between my teeth because I was sorry that I could not find the flag with the knitting-needle attachment, and something as self-contemptuous about my involuntary glance at the banyan bower. It had held its own through wind and rain, and although scarcely an inviting retreat amid the pervading humidity, looked undeniably picturesque. The situation was well chosen, having a natural avenue open to the creek side, and I had trimmed and woven better than I knew in shaping the vine-grown thicket. The mossy floor was oozing sponge to my tread, and the tabouret would, I feared, have to be hung out to dry piece-meal ere it would be prudent for the proprietors of the lodge in the wilderness again to sit side by side upon it.

I was still inspecting house and furniture when voices and

steps sounded along the brink of the stream, and the flutter of a white dress past the rents in the bush-fringe forewarned me of Ailsie's arrival. A gentleman held her hand, and walked in the path, swinging his cane, while she darted from rock to rock like a kitten.

"There he is!" I heard her cry gladly, before I could leave my covert.

To spare myself embarrassment and the new-comers the ascent of the hill, I met them more than half-way.

"This is papa!" said my "friend," gravely gracious during the ceremony of introduction. "Papa, this is the kind gentleman I told you about—Mr. Barry,"—pausing and looking to me for the rest.

"Haye," I supplied, smiling. Mr. Darling took me up:

"As I anticipated! I met your father, with whom I have had a business acquaintance for some years, in the city on Friday. He told me that you were boarding near us for the summer. I should have sought you in fulfillment of my promise to him, even had not my little daughter here told me of your goodness to her. She has reported such wonderful things of your joint achievements in fortification and bower-building that her mother and myself fear she may have been troublesome."

I denied this with equal politeness and truth, adding to Ailsie that I had missed her dolefully in her absence.

"Not more than she has her new friend," said her father. "She was positive, scripture to the contrary, that a second Noachian deluge had begun."

After a few minutes had been given to lamentation over the effaced fort and rejoicing that the arbor was rather improved than injured by the rain, Mr. Darling turned again to Ailsie. He was evidently very proud as well as fond of her.

"My daughter, will you deliver mamma's message, or shall I?"

She repeated it as prettily as she had performed the introduction. Mrs. Darling sent, with her compliments to me, an invitation to take tea and pass the night at her father-in-law's.

"You are to stay all night because the evening air isn't good for invaliders," Ailsie explained.

Nevertheless, we passed the interval between tea and bedtime upon the broad porch running along the south front of the Darling homestead. The family proper consisted of the elder Darling and his wife, as fine specimens of squire and lady as English manor-house could have produced, and their youngest son, Wynant, a gay collegian at home for the vacation. The rest of a large family of children were out in the great world, with families and homes of their own.

"You may imagine what a welcome variety in our humdrum life is the visit of our son and his home-treasures," remarked lovely old Mrs. Darling to me, "and how pleasantly the sound of children's voices brings back thoughts of the time when I had all my little flock about my knees every evening, and the house was never still during the day."

Mrs. Pressley Darling returned the affectionate smile that

rested upon her, with Baby Evy in her lap and Robby hanging upon the back of her chair.

"It is not every grandmother who would tolerate the hubbub," she said. "But think, Mr. Haye, how delightful must be the exchange to us—the mountain air and scenery and the hospitality of this blessed resting-place after close rooms and streets in the city!"

While her elders talked, Ailsie sat upon a stool between her father and myself, her hand on his knee, her head on the elbow of my arm-chair, perfectly quiet, and if one might judge from her countenance, entirely contented. As the sun sank into a sea of such transparent goldenness as belongs to June evenings, and none other, the mountains heaved higher their purple backs against the sky, and the shadows rolled into solemn stillness in the valleys. Here and there, upon the plains, glimmered an eye of light like a jewel upon breast or brow of ripe and royal nature; the gleam of lake or pond, or the sudden turn into the open country of a mountain stream. Soon, the tree-shadows on the lawn grew into renewed distinctness; the dusky mother bedecked herself with ornaments of silver instead of gold; the hard outlines of the mountains were softened, and farther away than when they had seemed to close, dark and lofty, in upon us with the withdrawal of the sun. But in the valleys the shadows never stirred, and the gorges were labyrinths of mysterious gloom, even when the moon had cleared the bars and mists of the wooded hill-tops and looked full upon us.

The smaller children were sent to bed, and the tones of

the group left upon the porch were lower, made gentler and harmonious by the influence of the hour and scene. The genial flow of conversation, with its exquisite flavor of refined breeding and genuine good-will, delicious to me as the music of olden days and his own fireside to the time-worn traveller, was punctuated, sometimes emphasized, by rests, and in these the sacred quiet of the evening spoke to us as man speaketh with his friend. The advancing tide of moonlight flowed in upon the three sitting nearest the edge of the piazza, washed the hem of Ailsie's white dress, crept up to the hand lying with lax, still fingers upon her lap; onward and higher until it showed her face, paled by the chaste lustre, and brought out the sheen on the ripples of dark hair tossed back from her forehead. She was gazing steadily upward, her thoughts further away than the shadowy line of the most distant hills. Childish wonderings, the outreaching of an immortal soul beginning to be reverently conscious of what it might be—what reach and enjoy—were in the look upon which none of us who were observant of her dared remark.

It was in one of the feeling-fraught rests to which I have referred, that she began to sing, according to the family habit on Sabbath evenings. The sound was scarcely more than a measured breath at first, and seemed to escape her involuntarily. The words were audible presently, and the movement more assured. It was a chant; a Gregorian, with which we were all familiar. The mother joined in softly with a sweet second, father and uncle followed, upbearing

the child-voice into roundness and strength of which I had not believed it capable.

"I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills
From whence cometh my help.
My help cometh from the LORD,
Which made heaven and earth.
He will not suffer thy foot to be moved;
He that keepeth Israel shall not slumber;
Behold! He that keepeth Israel
Shall neither slumber nor sleep.
The LORD is thy keeper;
The LORD is thy shadow upon thy right hand.
The sun shall not smite thee by day,
Nor the moon by night.
The LORD shall preserve thee from all evil,
He shall preserve thy soul;
The LORD shall preserve thy going out
And thy coming in from this time forth,
And even forevermore.

"Glory be to the FATHER, and to the SON,
And to the HOLY GHOST!
As it was in the beginning,
Is now and ever shall be,
World without end! Amen!"

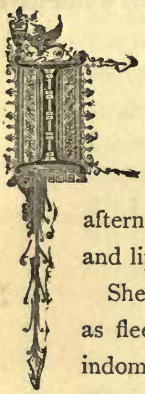
As the last exultant note trembled towards the stars, the child who had led us in the service of praise arose silently, shook hands with me, kissed the others, still mutely, and withdrew, her gliding step a mere throb of the stillness.

O my little love! when I remember this, the beginning

of your holy ministry to my undisciplined spirit, the tenderness and grace of your unconscious bringing of the things of the better life and showing them unto me—uncultured, selfish stripling that I was, dull and common clay beside the fine clearness of your soul—tears say for me what words have never expressed!

## CHAPTER IV.

### "PAPA!"



IT was more than a month after my introduction to the Darlings, and consequently my entrance upon the delights of a summer in the country, that Ailsie and I returned home one afternoon from a raspberry picking, with full baskets and lips dyed as darkly as were our fingers.

She was as plump and brown as a partridge, and as fleet of foot amidst stubble and brambles. An indomitable excursionist, she had dragged me over stone walls, dry ditches and spongy marshes by the shortest route, which she knew as well as any crow that flew—and, I was inclined to think, like the birds of the air, by instinct—to the "big piece."

"Big piece of what?" asked I, when she named our destination.

"You'll see when you get there!" was all the answer I got.

I found it to be a square half-mile of wild raspberry vines packed as closely together as they could grow and bear, and looking from the road and encompassing highlands like a sunken morass cloaked with briars, leaves and fruit. We had made a picnic of our jaunt, taking lunch along in our

baskets, and dutifully emptying them to the last crumb, while resting beside a spring that bubbled up considerately on the borders of the berried jungle. We had famous appetites, both of us. Ailsie was growing vigorously in the free, active life she led, and the greed of convalescence for everything edible was mighty upon me. Ezra had ceased to carp at my disrelish of such "hullsome vittles" as stale "rye 'n Injun" and fried pork with the rind on, and my discussion, after a two-mile walk, of Mrs. Darling's cold chicken, flaky biscuits, and the "wonders," well-named for their crispness and flavor, would have been a study to any one but a hungry man—or child.

"There are so many berries we needn't pick any beceps the very biggest," said sage Ailsie.

But even when we followed this rule we were not long in piling our baskets until not another would stay on the heap.

"If we crowd on the tops we shall have raspberry *jam*," I observed, and was rewarded for my bad pun by the flash of eyes and teeth that never failed to applaud anything approximating humor.

Home we trudged in great spirits. My knees were somewhat unsteady from stooping to the level of the berry-bushes, but Ailsie did not flag in step or tongue. She "came out strong" in *tête-à-têtes*. In company with three or four others, although these might be members of her own family, she was less talkative as a rule than are most intelligent, sprightly children, in like circumstances. A nonpareil of a listener, she was apparently so much engrossed in gathering informa-

tion, sifting it, and storing away in her retentive memory what was worth preserving, that she had no leisure for communicating her own views and feelings. Her great gray eyes lost nothing that was to be seen, and her ears and wits were as acute.

To-day her chatter was illimitable, receiving impetus at every yard from bird, beast, leaf and stone. Her taste for natural history was a passion, and her love for all dumb creatures exceeded the bounds of gentlest Christian charity. Her specialty that summer, if an entomologist so catholic in her likings could be said to have one,—was spiders.

"What becomes of them all in the day-time I can't *imagine!*" she discoursed to me in the thick of a brambly field, where dewberries were to be had by the bushel for the picking. "You wouldn't believe that every morning, when there's a heavy dew, the whole of this field looks as if it was covered with white lace. White lace with teenty taunty pearls strung on it, like those on a breastpin and pair of earrings Aunt Evy has—white and shiny as frost. I used to make believe that the fairies had been washing their ball-dresses and had hung them out to dry. Now, see here! this is what I'd like to know! the webs wouldn't be here 'less the spiders had put them on the grass and bushes to catch flies and gnats and lady-bugs and things. That's the trouble about spiders, they *will* kill things to eat. Harmless little bugs and grasshoppers before they are grown, and butterflies that aren't strong enough to break out of the cobwebs. I wouldn't hardly believe it till I caught them at it."

"I hope you punished them properly ?"

"No ! Why should I be cruel because they were ? 'Specially as they didn't know any better, and as the hymn says about bears and lions, "'Tis their nature to ?" For all that, it's an ugly nature. But as I was going to tell you, I had a tame one in a tumbler once, tilted up the leastest bit at the side so's he could breathe. A beauty—yellow with black stripes like a tiger, and eyes like yellow beads. He wasn't so very tame either, but I meant to do it. I'd been reading about Baron Trenck and his tame spider in prison. Well ! I tried my very best to teach him to eat bread and sugar and milk, and such nice food. But, bless you ! he just *wouldn't !* He was real obstinate about it. I can't help hoping he would have behaved better when he got well acquainted with me. I *sup*-pose he was shy at first. But he died, poor fellow, before he learned anything. Why, there must be a thousand spiders hiding somewhere in this very meadow. You've seen the fine threads that catch on your eye-lashes and tickle your nose when you're riding or walking in the woods ? They're spiders' webs. It's too queer what they do with themselves when they hear us coming. It must be fun to see them scamper to hide, and better fun for them than playing tag. But come here when you may, you'll never see so much as the toe of a daddy-long-legs."

"You seem to be pretty well used to their ways," I said. "Have you ever been here before ? Or are the habits of all colonies of spiders alike ?"

The field was nearly half a mile from the house, and I was surprised at her familiarity with the ground.

"Often and often! Grandpa brings me sometimes, and once Uncle Wy when he was out hunting for woodcockers. They aren't a mite like woodpeckers, you know, beceps their long bills. But they live upon worms, too. Only they fish them up out of wet ground, instead of tapping on trees to make them run out to see what's the matter. And twice I ran away. That was before I knew how wrong and disobedientish it was. Ever and ever so many weeks ago. Before I got acquainted with you or had ever been to Maple Hill, not very many days after we came to grandpa's. You must have suspected that I was a runaway child the first time you saw me—didn't you?"

"What else could I think, Ailsie? Unless that your father and mother did not care much what became of their little daughter? I saw from your dress and behavior that you were not a wood-cutter's or farmer's child, even if there had been any farm-house nearer to the creek than Mr. Gaskin's."

"I'll tell you just exactly how it happened," she began in a violent hurry as was her way when the cause of truth or the character of those she loved was to be vindicated. 'Mary used to take Robby and baby and me out walking, and stay all the morning. 'There's nothing like the country air and rambling about the beautiful woods for doing the innocent crayturs good, ma'am!' she'd say to mamma. And this was the way she went a-walking in the country and

rambling in the beautiful woods! She went straight as she could waddle to the same *exactikle* place every blessed morning, and settled herself down on a stone—when she had spread her shawl on it—in the shade of the big oaks by the pasture-fence, and sewed patch-work pieces for her sister-in-law's bed-quilt the live-long forenoon."

"I have seen her there several times," interrupted I, much amused.

"Course you have! She says it's the 'garden-spot of the farrum—that fence-corner!' So Robby used to paddle around and talk to the sheep, and throw wee bits of pebbles at the cows that were too far off for him to chase or hit, and never got tired of looking at the two "baby horses." That's what he calls colts. Baby reg'larly went to sleep in the wagon, and Mary sewed black and green and red and blue and white pieces higgledy-piggedy in what she called her 'Irish chain,' and sung 'Cush-*la*, cush-*la*, *mac*hree-e-e!' to baby and herself until I was sick and tired of hearing her stuff and nonsense. She can't turn a tune to save her life. I *wish* you could hear her sing 'Dear, dear, what can the matter be!' The idea of the little dump of red hair on the back of our Mary's head being tied up 'with a bunch of blue ribbons!'"

We both stopped to laugh. We were in the road, now, and I proposed a rest on a turfy bank while the story went on. Released from the duty of carrying the berry-basket she would not resign to me except when we were climbing fences, Ailsie's stained hands played a conspicuous part in

illustrating the remainder of the narrative. Her hat was thrown beside her on the ground. Her dark, warm complexion and mobile face gave her the look of a Spanish gitana.

Lying on the slope of the bank, I feasted my eyes while I listened. She always interested me, but to-day I was in the humor to be entertained, or she was unusually *piquante.*

"All this was dull music for me, as you may *sup*-pose, and I got into a way of going off by myself down to the river. Then I made up ex-plo-ding exper-ditions"—a death-struggle with both words—"and in one of these I happened upon the creek that runs by Maple Hill and empties into the river just before you get to the bridge. Every day I went a little further until I got to Fairy Land. After that I always stopped there. That's the way I got acquainted with my disguised prince. I used to sit on a stone and watch him and he never minded me any more than he would another fish. At last I met you."

"On a happy day for me, Ailsie, dear," I said, affectionately.

Her eyes shone, and she touched the back of my hand with her empurpled finger-tips—a swift gesture, full of tender meaning.

"It is good in you to say that! The second day I saw you, I couldn't hold my tongue when I went back to Mary, and I talked so much about how nice and kind you were, and what you had helped me to do, and what great things we were going to do, that she began to look frightened—I couldn't guess what about until she said in that sly, *catty* way of hers that I hate—it always means that she wants to get

around me about something—'Ye'd better not be spaking too free to yer mamma, about the foine, strange gintleman, darlint, or she'll, mebbe, forbid yer going the morrow.'

"I told her all about him yesterday," I said, "and she gave me the ribbon for our flag."

"'In course ye did, yer poor innocent, and she put a quare lot of questions to me about it, last night. It was harrd wurruk I had to kape her from ondirstandin' that ye had strayed so far,—that 'twas the crick, not the river, where ye'd been building yer bush-house and what-not, and that I wasn't forninst ye, all the while. Ah! but she's a particler leddy, yer mamma is, and wirra! wirra! wher's the use of botherin' the dear leddy wid shtories of what's goin' on all over the farrm, at all at all, Miss Ailsie?'"

My laugh at the capital mimicry of the Irish girl's voice and brogue did not move the narrator to mirth. She was in thorough earnest with her explanation of the suspicious circumstances attending our introduction, and was not to be distracted by side-questions.

"Then, I *took fire!* I left her right there, picking up her old patchwork off the grass, and 'wirra-wirra-ing' to her heart's content, and marched straight to the house and told mamma every sep'ret, individigel thing! How I had gone away, miles and miles from Mary every single day for a fortnight, and stayed hours and hours, and how she wasn't near me all the time you and I were at work, and hadn't so much as seen you, and didn't even guess where my Fairy Land was, and I hoped she would never find it out, for she'd spoil

all our fun. And how she hadn't wanted me to say anything about my running away, and to pretend I hadn't gone further than the bridge, and that was the first way I knew 'twas a sin to go off by myself, and nobody with me. And wouldn't she, please, if I was to be punished, put me to bed, that day, and not keep me away from the creek to-morrow. Because the Bower wasn't quite altogether done, and it wouldn't be honer*er*able to dis'point a gentleman who had been so very, very good to me, and I was sure you were a perfect gentleman!

"Mamma behaved beautifully! She took me on her lap, and asked me, as Mary would have said—'a quare lot of questions,' but she didn't scold so much as a whisper. She said I hadn't understood that it was not safe or right for little girls to go so far away from everybody, 'specially so near the water. When papa heard it, he said I wasn't really and truly a runaway—only 'a stray,'—and he didn't want me to be stolen, and he showed me the devertisements about lost dogs and horses in the papers, and made me laugh by wondering if he had better crop my ears, or put a collar about my neck with his name on.

"But about mamma! she promised to go to the bower with me, next day, and see you herself. Only it rained straight along until Sunday, you remember."

"Don't I? I shall never forget it. I wanted you even then, little one. I was ready to blow my brains out by Saturday night; I did think of hanging myself with the bed-cord, but it was too much trouble to undo the hard knot with which it was tied."

"Pity you hadn't asked Mr. Gaskin to untie it for you—" mischievously. "He wouldn't have minded the trouble if you'd told him what you wanted with it. Dear me! how you interrupt my story! I rather think mamma gave that Mary a going-over, for she had her in her room for most an hour that afternoon, and Mary's eyes were red as my spotted rabbit's when she came out. But she didn't dare be cross to me about telling tales. I 'pected she would be horrid for a month and perfectly bominationable. But I didn't care much. I don't like to have people cross with me. But it's always right to tell the straight, plain truth, and you do feel so comfortable when it's out and over with! It's like some medicine I took once, lime-water, I believe—that wasn't nice going down, but left a sweet clean taste in your mouth."

"Were you not afraid to wander about the country, alone?" asked I. "There are not many little girls of your age who would venture to do it."

"Pooh! there's nothing in the country to be afraid of! Cows and dogs and oxens never hurt anybody that doesn't trouble them. Now, town is dreadful! I lie awake all night, sometimes, thinking about fire and bugglers and kitsnappers and drunken men till I am scared out of my senses. I'm a million times more afraid of a drunken man than I would be of a gristle bear. One chased me, once."

"O Ailsie! a grizzly bear?"

I could not win her to smile or scold at my willful misconstruction of her words.

"A drunken man!" she said in a whisper, a strong shud-

der shaking the color out of her very lips, her eyes frightened. "I was a little girl, only five years old. I had been to see Emma Rolfe who lives on the next block. It was pretty late, for they were beginning to light the lamps in the street. Right on the corner this awful man hallooed in my ear, and made a great trampling with his feet. 'I'll catch you!' he said. How I ran! Papa was opening our front-door, and I fell down at his feet; I could just see him, and that was all. My feet had got so heavy I couldn't have gone a step further. I thought I was dead. Drunken men ought to be hanged right off, like mad dogs!"

Her vindictive energy on this theme had long since ceased to amuse the family, as I found when I happened to mention the story she had told me to her father. He related the incident to me which she had outlined, regretting the occurrence as an absolute misfortune. The effect of the fright upon the susceptible child had been terrible, so alarming in its outward manifestation that medical aid had been summoned to quell her excitement, and secure the sleep without which it was feared her brain would give way. All allusion to the subject was strictly prohibited in the household, and for a year her parents had hoped she was outgrowing the recollection of it. Mr. Darling regarded her voluntary recital of the story to me as a token that the violence of her unreasoning terror was subsiding. In the country, as she said truly, she was devoid of physical timidity. She loved and made friends with whatever lived and moved, made a reality and a joy of the lovely old myths of elves and naiads and

wood-nymphs ; moved through the valleys and groves peopled by her imagination, like the brave little princess of them all. Of her moral courage I have given evidence in her own account of the manner in which she met the nurserymaid's adroit temptation to deception and overt falsehood.

I was to see another side of the kaleidoscopic character before the day was spent.

It was sunset by the time we reached home, but the aspect of the family group upon the portico was not quietly contemplative as was usual at this hour. Wynant, in true fisherman's rig,—trowsers tucked inside of his long boots, and the crown of his slouched hat wreathed with catgut, snells, hooks, and flies, was upon one knee on the grass-plat in front of the door, and the others had crowded to the edge of the porch to see the trout he emptied from his creel. They shone in the afternoon light as if dripping from a quicksilver bath ; the red insignia of their nobility starring their sides were so many rubies.

The chorus of admiration broke out afresh at our approach.

"Better than berrying, eh, old fellow?" cried Wynant. "Another time you will make a wiser choice. I haven't seen them rise so beautifully, before, this year. It was superb sport!"

Ailsie frowned, nettled by the taunt at my preference for the berrying expedition as well as grieved by the wholesale slaughter of her favorites.

"I don't see anything very grand in murdering a few lit-

tle fish, no longer than your hand, who never hurt anybody and hadn't sense enough to keep off your hook," she said pertly, or, so it sounded to her father, who was himself an enthusiastic sportsman.

"Be still! Do not let me hear you speak in that tone again!" he ordered sternly. "That is a splendid fellow!" to his brother, who drew out and held up to general view the last treasure of the basket and the handsomest of all. "He must weigh at least two pounds."

"The gem of the collection!" said the captor, handling him with fond triumph, brushing a bit of grass from his silver skin and stroking his fins. "Yet I did not catch another within a quarter of a mile of him. And when I came to think of it, the marvel was how he chanced to be there, not that he had the pool all to himself. Father! did you ever hear of taking trout below the falls in Yawpo creek? I hooked this prize in a hollow just at the foot of Maple Hill. If he had had the wit to keep still, I never should have thought of stopping there. But he rose at a dragon-fly as I came in sight, and missed him, diving back to his hiding-place under the rock, to wait for another. 'All the better for me, old chap!' said I, and in less than two minutes, I whipped one across the pool which was as much to his taste it seemed—"

"*Where* did you say you caught him?" asked Ailsie, pressing forward, with circling eyes and failing color.

"Directly below what you call your bower, girlie! You must have noticed the place. It looks like a spring, shut in by stones, except on one side."

A scream interrupted him. Ailsie had dropped her berry-basket, and was fairly dancing with anger and distress.

"It was my beauty, my prince! my dear little tame trout!" she cried. "Mr. Barry! do you see what this bad, bad man has done? I wish you had fallen in yourself and been drowned!"

"Ailsie!"

"I do, papa! He is a cruel monster! He's worse than a cannibal! I'll never, never like him, or speak to him again. And to fool the dear little fellow with a make-believe dragon-fly, just to yank him out with a hook! It's too sinful and shameful to think of!"

Her mother tried to lead her away, but she resisted in her frenzy, wringing her hands and shrieking out fresh denunciations with every breath, her face darkened and swollen by passion.

Her father laid a hard hand on her shoulder.

"Ailsie! hush! this moment! Do you hear me? Go to your room and stay there until you are willing to ask your uncle's pardon. Not a word will I have now!" for the writhing lips were framing speech. "What I say I mean. Go!"

With one wild sob she rushed away, and, in the shocked pause during which we stood looking at one another, we could hear her stout walking-shoes storming up the staircase and along the upper hall to her chamber.

Wynant was sorry and puzzled; Pressley, more displeased than I could have believed he could be with his best-loved child.

"Upon my soul I had no idea she could cut up so rough!" stammered the former. "If Mount Vernon's 'summer breeze' had suddenly waxed into a tornado I couldn't have been more astounded. You don't suppose, though, that the little witch really recognized the trout? Why they are all alike as peas in the same pod."

"I suppose nothing," said his brother, "except that among us we are spoiling that child in a manner that is both foolish and hurtful. As to humoring a mad whim like this, and passing over such language and behavior as she has just given us a specimen of, it is not to be thought of. She ought to be severely punished, and she shall be, if she do not succumb very quickly."

"I presume I come in for my full share of your condemnation of the conspiracy of spoilers," I said, fretted that it was not easier to treat pleasantly with him after his harsh dictum. "I hope you will not accuse me of a disposition to shirk censure or responsibility, and that you will hear me patiently while I plead my client's cause. I believe that I understand better than anyone else here the reasons for what you considered an unprovoked paroxysm of temper, whereas she is chafing under actual bereavement."

I told, then, the history of my introduction to the disguised prince, the imaginary friendship between him and his human visitor, describing her grief when I hinted at the possibility of my catching him, my pledge not to attempt it, and the many stories she had confided to me of his intelligence and tameness. Warming into true partisan sympathy with the

telling, I looked down with actual pity upon the dead beauty lying stark upon the sward, and bethought me of the green-and-brown nook, cool and deep, with shade of tree and rock, from which he had been ravished.

"Pure fancy, you may say," I concluded, speaking as much to myself as to those about me. "But those of us who have studied Ailsie do not need to be reminded how much of her world and her life lies in the realm created by her imagination."

My appeal was not without instant and visible effect. The eyes of grandmother and mother were moist; Squire Darling "guessed," bluntly, that "if nobody felt more like eating the baby's plaything than he did, it wouldn't be worth while to cook it."

Wynant's concern would have been ludicrous had we not been more or less partakers in it.

"It does seem like a blamed shame!" he confessed, turning the slain "prince" over on the soft grass, compunction in visage and touch. "Why didn't somebody drop me a hint to steer clear of that particular hole? And for the poor little fool to fling himself right in my teeth was the unluckiest stroke of all. I say, Pressley, what if I comfort her by promising to bury him with all the honors of war and raise a tomb-stone to his memory? Wouldn't the composition of the epitaph mitigate matters somewhat?"

Pressley's sternness did not relax.

"Ailsie has behaved inexcusably!" he said shortly. I

suspected he could not trust himself to many words. "She shall confess her fault and ask her uncle's pardon,—or—"

He walked off,—perhaps to cool his wrath—perhaps to nurse his resolution.

It was a wretchedly uncomfortable evening. We all sat upon the porch in the moonlight and tried to comfort ourselves as upon other moonlighted nights, but the dreary jocularity of jests and the palpable machinery of the commonplaces each felt in duty bound to keep going in the swing of question and reply, would have moved us to genuine amusement had our hearts been less heavy. The absence of the blithe figure that should have been flitting from one to the other with merry badinage or shy caress, or sitting with still hands and musing face that required not the interpretation of spoken language, or singing with the moonlight on her uplifted brow and such melody in her young voice as made us hold our breath with delight and awe—this was the sadder burden upon thought and spirit for the vision the missing her conjured up,—our pet, weeping as from the sluiceways of a breaking heart upon her little bed up-stairs. Weeping, yet, as her mother reported, in grieved amaze, obdurate to persuasions, deaf to the arguments with which she had striven to bring her into compliance with her father's will.

"I tremble to think what the end may be," said the gentle parent, watching her husband's promenade upon the lawn, his cigar his solitary counsellor. "Pressley suffers greatly, and, I dare say, is secretly repentant that he raised the issue. But he will not give up. Nor will Ailsie say that she is sorry.

It is their first pitched battle, and their mutual love makes it more serious."

"Pressley is making a particular donkey of himself, and trying to make me seem a brute to the child," growled Wynant. "If I had my way she should be down here on the double quick, hearing me say how sorry I am that I ever learned to cast a fly. You don't believe, Annie, that he'll really—punish her if she don't come in to his measures? By George! if he should lay the weight of his finger upon her, I'd punch his head for him!"

It was a family quarrel with which I should have had no concern, but my blood ran first cold, then, like liquid fire at the suggestion of such brutality.

"It would kill her!" escaped me, before I could consult with discretion.

The grandmother signed audibly. I saw the Squire shake his white head in earnest disapproval, whether of parental discipline or of unwarrantable interference with the same, I did not ask.

"How still the night is!" observed Pressley, in a tone of serene indifference, returning to the porch. "You can hear the roar of the milldam, two miles off."

No one offered a reply to this remark addressed to the company at large. Since he did not deign to notice the prevalent depression, or to soothe the perturbation which was the fruit of his harshness, we were not disposed to second his motion toward conciliation. We were behaving like sulky children, but the revolt was general.

"We shall have a hot night, if the breeze do not come up from the river by midnight," he pursued, coolly ignoring our silence.

The words were yet upon his lips when something white and noiseless floated around the shaded corner of the house. It was Ailsie,—a wrapper of her mother's thrown on over her night-dress, her feet bare and her hands clenched tightly upon the trailing drapery gathered up and held against her breast to leave her steps free. She paid no attention to the sitters in the background. I doubt if she was aware of our presence. Her father stood upon the upper step of the porch, and she went directly up to him.

"Papa?" catching her breath in the rapidity of her articulation. "You wouldn't have me tell a lie? How can I say that I am sorry for what I said to Uncle Wy, if I am *not?*"

Wynant started forward. His sister-in-law held him down. The moon showed us every line of the tear-blotched visage, deathly pallid, but for these stains; the wide, imploring eyes filled with such agony and such love as made my heart ache to look upon; as wrings it more keenly to recall. The father's features were in the shadow of his hat-brim. His voice was firm, but not threatening.

"But you ought to be sorry, Ailsie. That you are not, shows that you are not subdued; that you are obstinate in your naughtiness. I can have nothing to say or do with you until you *are* sorry, and will say so."

"Papa!" Something was in her throat, and she had to swallow it before going on. "I have been thinking it all

over. If a wicked man was to kill *me* by mistake, for somebody else's child, would you feel like asking his pardon if you *did* call him a few bad names?"

There was a subdued rustle in the background, of feeling, or suppressed applause.

"That is ridiculous, Ailsie. A fish is not a child."

Nevertheless, his hand moved to his mouth to cover the twitching I did not believe was a disposition to laugh.

"Papa!" She had to brace herself upon the beloved name, at the beginning of each argument. "It seems foolish to you, because you are a grown man. But I did like my poor little trout very much, and I had such happy times making up stories about him that I got almost to believing they were true. And so many things I have loved and tried to tame, this summer, have died, or been taken away from me. Not big things, of course, that *you'd* care for. But I am not such a very big girl, yet, you know!"

Piteous little mousie! She had never looked so babyish before in my eyes. She had fastened her hands upon one of his, her eyes larger and deeper in the extremity of her entreaty.

"Papa! I am sorry that I vexed *you*. Ever so sorry! It hurts me dreadfully when you are angry with me. I'll ask your pardon, fifty—a hundred times!"

"That will not do, my daughter. You were exceedingly rude and unkind to your uncle who was not to blame for what he had done. You gave way to your temper, sinfully and shamefully, and called him names I am ashamed to

remember. I am mortified that my girl is not brave enough to say that she was naughty and ask his forgiveness for her behavior to him."

She shrank as if he had slapped her in the face, at the charge of cowardice, but did not lose her ground. After a longer pause than had preceded it, came her final attempt at honorable compromise.

"Papa! I will forgive *him!* Won't that do as well?"

"Bravo!" shouted Wynant, unable to restrain himself longer.

His brother strove vainly to make himself heard amid simultaneous acclamations and noisy clapping of hands from the spectators of the painful scene.

Seeing him waver, and encouraged by our sympathy, Ailsie sprang to his neck with an hysterical cry that hushed the uproar.

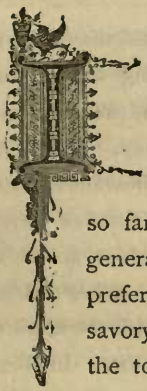
"Papa! Papa!"

Nothing else—repeated in every intonation of reproachful and grateful tenderness, until she began to sob again.

He lifted her in his arms, and bore her away as he might an infant, and we saw neither of them again that night.

## CHAPTER V.

### HEADACHE AND DIPLOMACY.



HAD anticipated some disagreeable scenes at my boarding-house, as the consequence of my intimacy with the Gaskins' "high-strung" neighbors. But the pious and censorious trio so far adopted the policy of the children of this generation, as to regard with extreme leniency my preference for the flesh-pots of Egypt—to wit, the savory fare that graced Mrs. Darling's board—over the tough and salted meats that were in sober literalness the *pièces de rèsistance* of the Gaskin *menu;* and for the profane and foolish babblings of the society in which I discussed the daintily-cooked viands, over the talk that seasoned yet more unpalatably, the corned beef and pork, cabbage and onions, salt fish, waxy potatoes and heavy bread, not forgetting the "biled dinners" in which Ezra's soul delighted. If the supposition had not been too wild to be nurtured into belief, I could have fancied that they respected their lodger the more because of the favor with which he was received at the objectionable Squire's; that they rolled as a sweet morsel under their tongues the complaints they vented to neighborhood visitors as to "how little they

saw of Mr. Haye, now that the Squire's folks were fair crazy after him. But 'twasn't to be wondered at, considerin'. Let the Squire and his'n alone for findin' out and courtin' rich and fash'nable strangers;"—in short, that they basked their little souls contentedly in the feeble glare reflected from my social importance upon them as my hosts.

I was, at all events, grateful that they refrained from verbal reprehension of my conduct in spending more than half my time away from my paid-for lodgings, presumably, with some member of the "big bug" confederacy. Not that I was deceived by this show of Christian forbearance into the persuasion that the coals of small, mean jealousies were not smouldering within the breasts of the elder and his spouse, or that the sharp-eyed grand-dame had not her feeble share of inward burnings at my "taking-up" with those who were immeasurably their superiors, although born in the same walk in life.

I understood, therefore, in its length and breadth—I should say, in its narrowness and shallowness—the meaning of the feigned condolence that met, one morning, my announcement that a severe sick-headache prevented me from touching so much as a cup of coffee, and my withdrawal to the porch, there to lie at full length upon the bench, while my room was cleared up.

"Housed—hey?" commented Ezra, stopping so close to me, on his way a-field as to nauseate me anew with the smell of stable and barn-yard given forth freely by his corduroy trowsers and cowhide boots. "That's a pity, now—ain't it?

For, I make no doubt there's some spree or racketing of some sort 'pinted for to-day. I never see the time I could go off a-pleasurin', with an easy conscience, and leave the farm; but Squire's a gentleman-farmer, and makes up in book-larnin' for the sweat of his face. 'Cordin' to the new-fangled religion so many's runnin' after, the Good Book ain't always on the square 'bout these things. You do look powerful sick! Ef you feel to want to send any excuses, or messages, or anything to your friends, over the crick, I'll manage to get 'em there, somehow or 'nother. I ain't so ruleable as some, but I'm willin' to be 'commodatin' when it comes into my way."

"Thank you! I have no message to send," I answered, faintly, holding my breath as long as I could.

By the time the clatter of his shambling feet upon the gravel walk had died away, and before the effluvia had begun to depart, his wife called to me from the kitchen-window.

"I 'spose we'll have the pleasure of yer company to dinner, Mr. H., seein' as how you can't git away very easy."

She chuckled spitefully over the dish she was wiping, and the grand-dame's wrinkled visage peered at me, under her elbow, to see what the laugh was about. Perceiving my prostrate condition, she hobbled out to me, her breath rattling asthmatically in her shrunken chest.

"Bilious—be ye?" stooping to scan my skin through her glasses. "Deary me! And the almond-tree shall flourish and all the daughters of music shall be brought low. Guess ye must 'a' got kinder stirred up, trampoosin' 'round so much in the sun. I never had no 'pinion of these kitin' ways.

People allers on the go for pomps and vanity, and the pride of the flesh. Ye're dretful yaller! I should'nt wonder a mite ef ye was goin' to have the janders. All ye can do is to try to cultivate a cheerful sperrit and a patient dispersition. The young lions lack and suffer hunger, ye mind. And if at any time you feel that a cup o' tea—sage, or catnip, or pennyr'yal, *or* boughten tea—would comfort yer inwards, neither me nor 'Liza Jane would grudge puttin' on the kittle for ye."

"Thank you!" I said, again, stifling a groan.

I was at her mercy and she did not slight her "privileges."

"Young folks think old people fools," she pursued, breathing more rattlingly in her earnestness. "Old folks *know* young people to be fools! Many's the time I've heard my granny say that. It's enough to put ye into mind of yer latter end, hevin' so many bad turns. The old must die. The young *may* die. A whip for the horse, a bridle for the ass, and a rod for the fool's back. He also that is slothful in his work is brother to him that is a great waster. We have scripter for *that*. Say what you will, ther' ain't no rubbin' that out. You're young, and gay, and flighty now, but for all you know, yer time may be at hand. And if ye should want the tea, you'll let me or Liza Jane know. I hope we are Christians and wouldn't be back'ard to do our jeuty by a sufferin' fellow critter."

She rattled her old bones back to her daughter-in-law, and I heard the two beating up my feather bed, with an eye to my immediate occupancy of the same, the strokes sounding like the swing of a flail.

Feathers! ugh! How my unquiet stomach protested against entering that low-browed chamber again, and still more strenuously against laying my head, and nose, upon the never too fragrant pillow until driven to it by sheerest necessity. I rolled off the bench and staggered to the furthest limit of the yard, where I stretched myself, helpless as a log, on the grass, more miserable than any other physical derangement could have made me, unless it were sea-sickness.

Nobody discovered me in the covert of a clump of lilac-bushes, and being out of hearing of the shrill clack of my tormentors' tongues, I did not lift my head until the horn blew once, and again, more discordantly, for dinner. Then I but dragged my heavy limbs to the kitchen door to say that I wanted nothing to eat, and this, although a "b'iled dinner" reeked mountainously in front of Mrs. Ezra, who "did" the carving. Retreating incontinently before inquiries and odor, I made a half-circuit of the house, and sat down, exhausted, upon the steps of a small porch in the north gable, and rather cooler at this hour, than the eastern "stoop." I think I dozed, with my head laid upon a chair that happened to be there—a green wooden chair with an arched back, slender spokes supporting the curve, and an inexplicable projecting hump exactly in the middle of the edge of the seat. I am quite sure that no one came near me for a long while. I know it grew hotter every minute, and the air seemed to close like an invisible thumb and finger, upon my nostrils, occasionally obliging me to open my mouth to get my breath.

Perhaps it is because I had never been ill before, that I recollect with curious distinctness the physical experiences of that year. It was assuredly for this reason that they appeared to me exceptional while undergoing them. They ought to have made a man of me, or so I argued, that day, within my drunken brain. They were a part, and I hoped devoutly there was nothing worse behind, of the discipline of life. With something akin to the maudlin gravity of the tipsy philosopher, who, prone in the gutter, or backed up by a lamp-post, proceeds to the study of the analogy between "the leaves that have their time to fall," and "I"—I analyzed and moralized upon my sensations. I was in the furnace of affliction, or, as the teeth of pain tore at the reticulated nerves of my scalp, threshed and winnowed. Or, altering the figure at the bidding of my heaving diaphragm, tossed by contrary winds and chopping seas. Once, there rushed over me, in a lucid interval, such a yearning for sight and touch of the mother who had died when I was five years old, that I could have wept aloud with loneliness and home-sickness. I have never, since the summer that taught me so much, spoken lightly of bodily anguish, or underrated the weight of its influence upon human character and immortal destinies.

Hitherto, I had believed that the bent of my mind and taste lay decidedly in the direction of psychological and metaphysical research. Under the anointment of personal suffering, I unclosed my eyes to the truth that the most intricate lines of these were so intertwisted with the subtle

laws and analogies of physiology that they could be most dexterously untangled by the student of the latter. If in my choice of a profession for life I have acted wisely for myself, beneficently for others, I ought not to regret that the furnace, threshing-floor, and stormy waves were to me, for the time, horrible realities, which taxed the utmost fortitude of my manhood. They certainly showed me what a toy of circumstance this same vaunted manhood was. The "Give me some drink, Titinius!" of Cæsar's fever-dried lips took on new and awful meaning. He arose superior to the fear of the last enemy, when he wrapped his robe about his head and lay down as to natural slumber at the foot of great Pompey's statue. The girlish cry to his attendant was the peevish protest of cowed nature beaten to the dust by a master mightier than death—Disease. All through those months of positive illness and fluctuating convalescence, there had been growing within me the conviction that he who should arm himself for battle with this potent foe of human happiness and usefulness, would go forth to the noblest crusade possible to man, if we except that which engages the Michael of moral mould in direct conflict with the devil and his angels.

I did not reason or resolve coherently while sick-headache had the mastery, and demoralization was its perfected work. But one definite thought found footing in my consciousness. If this attack had supervened upon the fever of two months before, I should, undoubtedly, have succumbed to it as the sheep to the butcher's axe; and I was

sorry it had not! In that case, I should not now be lying in the throes of living dissolution. I was sinfully ungrateful for the gain of strength that enabled me to maintain the conflict with the pain that racked me to faintness, with the faintness from which I struggled back to pain.

And still the air grew hotter and more lifeless. The leaves and green bells of the hop-vines climbing over the porch, hung motionless, save when jarred by the uneasy toss of my hand, or the tortured turn of my whole body. The grasshoppers sang in the parched turf in a shrill key that pierced my ears like fine twisted wire, and when one stopped to recover wind, the others kept on. Through the irregular arch made by the drooping vines above the steps, was visible a section of sky like white steel for hardness and gleam, that smote me blind whenever I raised my swollen lids. Once, I bethought me that decease in a bed-room, even under a slanting roof and upon a feather bed, would be more decorous and would seem more creditable when related in the obituary column of a newspaper, than to be found stark—could I ever be cold?—like a defunct cur that had crept under the vines to breathe his last, unmolested by curiosity or taunts. But I thought, also, of the sun streaming upon the sloping wall, and the rattle and smells of the kitchen invading door and windows, and the probable visits of mother and daughter-in-law, and lay still, awaiting merciful insensibility.

The roll of wheels on the dusty road, harshly audible in the dead stillness, stopped for an instant opposite the farm-house. There was a murmur of voices—a brief colloquy,

and the wheels went on down the hill. The incident was less than nothing to me at the moment. It would never have meant anything, but that the scorched grass crackled, presently, as under a rabbit's tread, and a shadow halted between me and the cruel light of the sky.

"Oh!"

The gasp of amazement and distress brought me to my senses. I sat up, holding my temples between my palms, in the conviction that the sutures of the skull were gaping, and forlornly hoping to keep the sundered sides in place.

"Oh!" reiterated the sweet voice. "You are sick? What can I do for you? Why didn't you come to grandpa's? Or send us word?"

"It was not worth while," I managed to get out. "It is only a sick-headache. It means nothing!"

After which mendacious statement, I subsided into recumbency, my arms doubled under my bursting head, and groaned abjectly.

Ailsie knelt on the floor and put two chubby cool hands upon my eyes—momentary relief from fever and glare that was inexpressibly grateful. Before the heat could return, she laid her folded handkerchief over them instead of the caressing fingers.

"Lie still until I come back!" she whispered, and sped around to the seldom opened front-door, where she knocked imperatively.

In the hot hush that lay about me seeming to enfold me

as its centre, I overheard the dialogue which followed Mrs. Ezra's appearance in response to the summons.

"Good-afternoon, Mrs. Gaskin! I am Ailsie Darling. My Uncle Wynant left me here just now, to pay a call to my friend Mr. Haye. He is lying in the porch around that side of the house suffering dreadfully with a headache. I *sup*-pose he wouldn't tell you anything about it for fear of worrying you and giving you the trouble of nursing him. He is very particular about troubling other people."

With all my pain and nausea I smiled at my delicate consideration for my hostess' sensibilities.

"He ought to have let you know, for a headache is a very bad disease. And men don't understand how to nurse themselves. If it would not be putting you to too much trouble, mayn't I bring him into that nice parlor and lay him down upon the sofa for a while? He shan't bother you and we won't put your furniture the leastest partickel out of order. I should like to take care of him until my uncle calls by for me."

"In the east stoop did you say?" interrogated Mrs. Ezra in unpromising accents. "What's to hender him from goin' up to his own room and layin' down like a Christian onto as good a feather bed as any man sick or well need ever want? Mother 'n' me—we made it up extra early in the day on a purpose. I hain't no opinion o' sech airs."

"Maybe his head is dizzy," answered the other voice. "My Aunt Evy often has sick-headaches, and she can't move hardly—her head swims so badly."

"Yer Aunt Evy! Who's she? Ther ain't none o' yer pa's folks what hez that name," waxing conversational at the sniff of gossip.

"She is my mamma's sister."

"Ah! married or single?"

"She isn't married. I *sup*-pose she must be single. But she is very nice."

"What's her last name?"

"Miss Marr," laconically.

"Young or old?"

"I don't think she's quite either."

From the changed direction of the sounds, I judged that Ailsie had backed off the steps, keeping her face turned to the catechist—also keeping her temper well in hand.

"I may take Mr. Haye into the parlor, mayn't I?" she continued. "It looks very cool and pleasant in there."

A grunt between satisfaction and sarcasm from my landlady.

"Thought likely you was used to sech fine doin's in town and over to gran'pa's, you wouldn't care to look at my parlor, let alone set down into it."

"I am sure it is very comfortable. I should like to go in very much."

The diplomatist was still backing nearer to me, but consistent in her policy of civility. "I will run around and tell him what you say about his coming in out of the sunshine. I'm very much obliged to you."

All this in her tuneful, childish treble, and with the simple

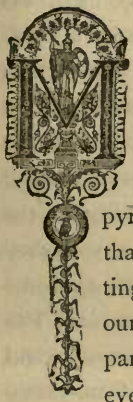
grace of naturalness that made her address always impressive. Before I could call her attention to the fact that the permission she had taken for granted had not been accorded, either directly or by implication, the house-door that opened upon the small porch was unlocked, and Mrs. Ezra, grimly compliant, stood on the threshold.

"Head ain't no better, hey? Ef you *won't* go to bed, hadn't you better step inside and lay down on the sofy in the best room? It's as easy as settin' here in the blazin' hot sun."

She led the way. I followed, not too steadily, flame-colored mists dancing before my eyes, the roar and thump of a steam-engine in my brain. Ailsie clung to my hand, planting her feet with great care, in the belief that she stayed my steps and averted possible disasters from my dizziness. The parlor had been swept and aired that forenoon, it being the allotted day of the week for the performance of this solemn ceremony. The air was deliciously cool after the furnace radiation of that without, and the darkness was yet more delightful. The sofa was covered with hair-cloth (of course), and slippery as glass; but when Ailsie had brought a pillow from my bed, and spread over the cotton slip encasing it the smooth linen handkerchief which had blindfolded me in the glaring porch, I let down the leaden misery I was wont to name my head cautiously upon it, yet binding my temples hard, that the cracking articulations of the sutures might not be utterly disorganized, and found tongue to declare myself comfortable—or that I must be, by-and-by.

## CHAPTER VI.

### HOW THE OLD TREE FELL.



MY eyelids ached and were flabby, requiring an effort of will, as well as of muscle, to raise them. Succeeding in the attempt when the engine-play ceased to strike sparks like lurid pyrotechny through or athwart my eye-balls, I saw that Mrs. Gaskin had added to the favor of admitting me to the "best room" that of leaving us to our own devices. In the cool dusk of the quiet parlor, my little guardian stood by me, watchful of every gesture, waiting patiently until I was ready to be spoken to.

"You are an angel, Ailsie!"

She put her hand upon my mouth. I held it there.

"Fie!" said my mentor, in the accent of a prude of the first water—or ice. "You are getting *di*-lir-i-ous. Or foolisher than common. You must behave properly, or I shall be obliged to go away. Perhaps it would be just as well for me to call Mrs. Gaskin back. If you would *per*-fer her nursing, you have only to say the word."

I professed penitence, and engaged to be preternaturally docile if she would stay by me.

"And not call in the dragon!" I subjoined.

"That is unthankful!" I was admonished. "'Tenny rate, the dragon's den isn't a bad place."

The quaint deftness of her small preparations for the business of the afternoon was something to see, if one's skull *was* splitting, his stomach void and rebellious. First, she bowed a pair of the solid wooden shutters to let in a crack of light. This must be kept out of my eyes, while it was needed to show her the way about the apartment, and a high-backed rocking-chair was pulled between me and the narrow ray. Next, she made choice betwixt two worked footstools, standing so exactly opposite to one another at the corners of the hearthstone one might have believed they were screwed fast to the floor. The selection was a subject for thought. She looked long at one, then at its mate. The pattern, wrought in very cross-stitch with aggressively vivid crewels, upon the first, was a medallion head of Gen. Washington. Upon the fellow, as a companion design, was a parrot, and this she at length brought to my side, settling her white dress about her for a protracted sitting.

"Now, if you can get a long nap, you will wake up almost well. That's Aunt Evy's plan."

"Dear child!" I said, "I cannot think of your moping here in the dark. If you are so kind as to insist upon sitting by me, get a book to amuse you, and open the shutters wide."

"Hush-sh-sh! I enjoy sitting in the dark and thinking. And—" the ever-ready flash of fun leaping to her eyes, while

her lips were demure, "if I wanted to read, there's nothing on the table there, but Johnson Walker's Dictionary, an Almanac, and a monstracious family Bible. Go to sleep, my dear; we'll make-believe I'm your aunty come to nurse you. Or—" laughing, now, all over her face—"you can shut your eyes very tight, and play it's your loved Mrs. Gaskin watching over you."

I affected to shiver. "I would rather go back to the porch and the wooden-bottomed chair with the lump in the middle. My respected landlady seems to have made an impression upon you, Ailsie."

"I should think she might upon anybody. But no more backbiting or talk of any sort!"

She took my hand upon one of hers and stroked it with the other, the soft finger-tips sending tiny rills of magnetic soothing along the nerves. Pretty soon she laid it back gently on the sofa and tiptoed to the mantel, where she had espied a fan. Even in her manner of using it she was unlike other children; evinced more tact and skill than are possessed by most professional nurses. The cooler air was a zephyr that did not lift a hair. The fan never came so near me as to tickle my face, or creak in my ear. It was a wide-bespread feather machine, however, and lest the weight should weary her wrist, I arrested the action.

"Would you mind singing to me, girlie? I begin to be sleepy."

She sang as naturally as she breathed. I have spoken of her voice as one of singular compass and sweetness, and

being joined to a quick ear, it had gained for her at this early age the reputation of a musical prodigy. Her parents were careful that praises of the rare gift should be dealt out judiciously to her. If she surmised what was likely to be in the future the value of her talent, she concealed it well. Her vocalization was as artless as that of a wood-thrush.

That day, after two or three more modern ballads, she sang Kathleen O'More. Strange as it may seem, I had never heard it before. I was falling asleep as she began to croon it, very lowly, that she might not recall me from the misty land.

> "My love, still I think that I see her once more,
> But ah, she has left me her loss to deplore—
> My own little Kathleen, my sweet little Kathleen,
> My Kathleen O'More!"

The rest was as simple. A poor little tale, trite and bald in terms, common enough in the happening, but this child's rendering made of it a succession of "pictures from life."

The gentle milkmaid, "her hair glossy black, her eyes dark-blue;" the pensive figure on the cottage door-step; the smitten flower never lifted after the sweep of the chill night-wind; the bright corner of the old country church-yard, away from the shadow of yew-tree or mossy and moulder-ing wall, yet a corner where the robin built his nest and hopped lightly and fearlessly upon Kathleen's grave; these I saw, without the "making believe" the songstress was fond of recommending as an important means of securing enjoyment in this work-a-day world.

"That is very beautiful!" I murmured, without opening my eyes, as my imagination appropriated the last and most pathetic sketch.

"I am glad you like it. It is my very favorite!" she said earnestly. "I can remember begging mamma for 'Tathleen' when I was just able to ask for it. She used to rock me to sleep with it every night. Course I didn't understand it then. Aunt Evy—ah! you ought to hear *her!* sings it to me, sometimes. At twilight, you know, in her room, when we two are sitting by ourselves by the fire. It's like seeing it, every bit. I don't sing it to many people. It's one of my privatest songs."

She wandered off to something else—a Scotch air if I remember aright, and I fell asleep in the midst of it.

The strangest light I ever saw was in the room when I was aroused from the depths of healing slumber by a sudden noise—I could not at at once determine what. The shutters of one window were open, and outside of it were the sparsely clothed branches of an old cherry-tree, drawn black and motionless upon a background done in sepia, yet with a coppery glare striking through it that was very curious. This was the first thing my eyes rested upon, and I could not make out what it meant, nor where I was, until a full minute had passed; only lay gazing at the fantastic cartoon and the weird illumination. The four corners of the parlor were thick with gloom. Every object in the middle of it was unnaturally distinct. The spider-legs of the centre-table cast crooked shadows upon the red and green

arabesques of the carpet. "HOLY BIBLE" on the cover of the ponderous volume that had the place of honor on the table was in letters that flamed as the characters traced by the finger of GOD upon the first tables of the law may have burned under Moses' eyes. The clear brown of Ailsie's complexion was bronzed, and there were tawny glints on her hair that did not belong there.

She did not observe, directly, that I was awake, but remained perfectly still, looking at the cloud, the apparent source of the baleful radiance, that had wrought such transfiguration. Now and then, she drew a deep breath, in awed interest—not alarm.

She started as I touched her folded hands.

"You have waked up! Good! I could'nt bear to look at you. You were not at all like yourself, but pale and yellow, more like a brass head papa has in the library at home than my dear Mr. Barry."

She drew her stool closer to me; took my hand and leaned her cheek confidingly upon it.

"Were you afraid?" I inquired. "We are going to have a thunder-storm. But you are quite safe, little bird."

She smiled brightly. "I never thought of being frightened. I am rather fond of thunder-storms. Mamma and I watch them rising over the mountains from her windows. It's grand! She says they are no more dangerous than the sunshine. People get struck by the sun 'most any time in town, in the hot weather. It lightened once, a while ago,

and there was one thunder. It was that woke you up, I *sup*-pose. Is your head better?

"Much, thank you! You and sleep have cured me. I am only weak and giddy. The pain has nearly gone."

"Shan't I ask Mrs. Gaskin for something for you to eat?"

"No, dear. There is time enough for that. I shall be most comfortable lying here and watching the storm with you. I could not eat, even if grandma were to tempt me with one of her suppers."

She nestled in the embrace of the arm cast about her. We were such dear friends now, that I might take the liberty, and likewise beg, when she was in a very benign mood, the supreme favor of a kiss at parting for the night.

"It is *very* good to be with you! Of course we are safe anywhere, for GOD is everywhere. But when we can see the people we love it is a great convenience. Don't you think so?"

"It is always a "convenience" and a happiness to have you near me," I rejoined. "There is the lightning again! Look at that old tree, Ailsie, the next time the flash comes. It really seemed to shake all over, as if frightened out of its wits."

"Out of its bark, you mean," she corrected. "What little it has left!"

The scanty drapery of leaves clinging to the boughs was of a sickly green, diversified by a sicklier brown. Caterpillars' nests—gray film without, squirming black within—were pendent from the moss-grown branches. The bark was, as

Ailsie had noticed, dropping piece-meal from the trunk that showed, white and lifeless, through the rifts and scars. It was a hoary monarch of its kind, and, in its prime, must have shaded all that end of the house. On gusty nights I had heard branches as large as my arm hurtle down the roof and plunge, with a dull thud, upon the turf.

"I kinder hate to cut the old cherry down, yet awhile," Ezra had said one day, when his wife had complained of the "litter" made by leaves and twigs.

"Yer grandfather sot it out," quavered the old mother, "Fifty odd years ago. There's been nigh 'pon a million bushels o' whiteheart cherries onto it, fust and last. Mother-in-law was a gret one for presarvin' and dryin' cherries. Many's the colic you got by stuffin' yerself with them whitehearts, Ezry, when you was a little chap. Deary me! how time goes! The righteous runneth into it, and is safe. Yes, yes!"

"I kinder hate ter stick the axe into it, yit," pursued Ezra, ignoring, in the lordship of manhood, the reminiscences of her who bore him. "It'll be easier cut, come winter, when the sap's run down, and I shan't be so plaguey hard pushed with other work. Winter's the time for cuttin' timber. It's powerful hefty business in hot weather."

And I had been so foolish as to credit the thrifty fellow for a moment with some touch of tender regard for the venerable warder that had guarded the Dutch-hipped roof of his forefathers when he was a baby!

The thunder succeeded the lightning quite at its leisure.

A sullen growl, waxing into as sullen a roar—very irregular on the descending scale, as if it had half a mind to turn back and repeat the performance—subsided finally into a grumble somewhere far off to the eastward.

"Sounds like a barrel rolling downstairs with a 'boo-ump!' for the landings and bottom," said Ailsie aptly.

The air was more stifling instead of cooler, after the flash and report. The storm was working itself up to the point of angry outburst with ominous slowness. The yellow-green leaves wilted until they lay flat upon the stems. The gnarled bole and decrepit boughs were drawn more sharply upon the sepia background, up which darker billows began to surge majestically. I fancied I could detect sulphurous odors in the atmosphere, and when I passed my hand over Ailsie's hair it clung to my fingers, then flew off as at the alternate touch of the poles of an electrical machine. The tempest would be something to be remembered when it did come.

To divert my companion's mind from observation of these phenomena, I pointed to a huge "hunk" of gingerbread in a plate set on a chair near by.

"Did you bring your luncheon with you? Or, is that for me?"

I had expected the curl of the upper lip that scouted both suppositions, but it was smoothed out by the smile that followed.

"As if I'd lug gingerbread around in my pocket! A kind old lady with the *rumpledest* face I ever saw, gave it to me

while you were sound asleep. I am sure she is kind, though she was so funny. I never imagined anybody exactly like her. She made me think of Cinderella's godmother, and 'Goody Gracious' in the story we read last week, and witches and pixies, and all that. She didn't speak 'loud—only whispered, sitting on that chair and stooping over towards me. Something in her throat rattled like dried peas in a sifter. She told me that she knew Grandma Darling when she wasn't any bigger than I, and that she 'was the purtiest girl in the land.' And then she said that 'cleanliness was akin to godliness,' and would I never forget that text? I said, 'No, ma'am—' and I don't believe she meant to be rude. But 'twasn't very polite to grandma, or to me."

I was choking with laughter.

"She meant nothing wrong, dear. It is only a way she has. Then, she gave you the gingerbread?"

"Yes, and said nursing was dreadful hungry work, and I'd 'better run out to play a spell, and look at the cropple-crowned chickens and *Buckshur* pigs.' She would enjoy—she *per*nounced it 'enj'y—' 'taking a mouthful of rest in the rocking-*cheer*'—that's the way she called it. I think it was then she told me the liberal soul should be made fat. She said it, sometime. She must have read a great deal of Bible, to remember so many verses that don't fit."

My laugh was irrepressible now. Ailsie's eyes twinkled with fun, then were gravely repentant.

"It can't be right to laugh at her, because she's so old and trembling. And she was very good to me. She opened

the shutters 'for fear I should get lonesome,' sitting in the dark; that was how I found out there was going to be a shower. I shouldn't have minded eating the gingerbread to please her, but mamma doesn't like to have me eat sweet things between meals. I didn't like to hurt the old lady's feelings, so I told her she might leave it there, and if I got hungry enough maybe I'd eat it. Or, perhaps, you'd take a piece."

The lightning flashed nearer and faster. The sooty billows suffused the broad surface of the cloud-curtain, and, from time to time, a cut like the sweep of a fiery cimetar split it from top to bottom. The sulphurous fumes were stronger, and the darkness closed in upon us, until Ailsie's face with its great, solemn eyes, was lifted out of the gloom like a brave, bright flower, ever turned to heaven.

There seemed to be no need for me to reiterate, "You are quite safe, darling," but I said it, not yet comprehending how one so young should not be terrified by the portents of a tremendous battle in the air.

"I know!" she answered calmly; "I was thinking how nice it was that my text this morning should have been, "Thou shalt not be afraid of the terror that walketh by night, nor the arrow that flieth by day." It was just as if GOD intended it. The lightning put me in mind of arrows. It is very comfortable to remember the verse just now. GOD doesn't ever say things he doesn't mean, you know."

The latch-knob rattled, and the grand-dame bustled in, her cap-strings flying in the draught created by opening the door.

"For the land sakes!" she ejaculated, skurrying across the room to the shutters she had unbarred. "What 'ud Liza Jane say ef she was to find this open, and ther' comin' 'on sech a blow as never was! The turribillest storm! Well! well! the night cometh in which no man can work!"

She was tugging at the support holding up the sash—a rusty nail which stuck fast in its hole.

I had arisen to help her, checking Ailsie, who sprang forward to do the same, and putting her behind me on the sofa as I left it—(I have always been thankful for the blind impulse that made me do this)—when the air seemed to take fire all around me, at once, and I was hurled violently backward to the floor.

If I was stunned, it was but for a second, for Ailsie's scream was yet ringing in my ears when I opened my eyes upon hers. My head was in her arms; overthrown chairs and footstools were heaped to the right and left of us, as by the toss of a mighty arm. The centre-table had been flung one way, the great Bible another.

Close to this last, her head almost resting upon its open page, was the body of the grand-dame.

The cherry-tree was cloven from crown to root, but it was no more dead than was she.

## CHAPTER VII.

TROTH-PLIGHT.

VACATION and convalescent laziness were over. I was back in my place in college and home, studying in earnest, and, Aunt Evy insisted, always a little too much for my strength, inasmuch as in addition to the cramming requisite to make up for lost time, I had commenced reading medicine out of lecture hours.

"If I had my way," said my privileged censor, I would seal up your medical treatises for twelve months, and stamp upon each seal, "*Festina lente.*"

My censor—for one of the great blessings of my life had come to me. Ailsie's Aunt Evy was mine also, by adoption, and of love. The Darlings' house was nominally my second home; in reality, it was the first in whatever went to make up the best and dearest elements of a heart heaven. And the "Innermost"—(a thousand thanks to Frederika Bremer for the word!) of the Darling household, was "Aunt Evy's room."

We three—she, Ailsie and I—were enjoying the glow of her wood-fire, the cheerier as the twilight advanced, one raw

winter's evening. It was the 15th of December, a date I have reason to recollect. Aunt Evy's knitting-work lay on her lap, and there was still sufficient daylight to show that it was a pretty fabric of red and white worsted. The tiny hands were notably clever in such cunning and tasteful manufactures. To this day, the sight of anything particularly ingenious or dainty in the way of knitting, netting or crocheting, reminds me of her.

I saw a young girl showing off what she styled "a sea-foam," the other night, with great pride and a spice of coquetry. Pride that she had fashioned it; coquettish delight in its becomingness, when it was thrown over her fair hair. It was pale green and pure white, fine as a spider's web, yet warm as ermine—at least, so she said. There was a painful stricture about heart and throat that kept back my smile at her innocent manœuvres. Not because she was young and fair, and cared not that I found her so, but for love of other hands that had wrought like fairy wonders, so many years agone!

Aunt Evy was very small and slight—"Queen Mab," her brother-in-law had dubbed her—and very fragile. She could just remember, she used to say, the time when she was well and strong; when people praised her rosy cheeks and laughed at her dumpling dot of a figure; when there were dimples where the knuckles now showed sharply on her hands, and her hair, still soft and lustrous, fell, when loosened, below her knees. By-and-by she had lost flesh and health, and had learned to cease looking for their return ages ago. Where

was the use of tormenting her friends and herself with uncertainties? It was only casting money after doctors, and time after money, and what poor treasures of rest and pleasure remained in the battered shallop after what had gone before, to keep up the pitiful farce of expecting to be well again in this world.

She divided her time between the homes of her two sisters, one of whom lived in a pleasant village on the Hudson River. But Mrs. Darling had her for three-fourths of the year, much to the other's discontent. In the winter she was invariably in the city, the recipient of such lavishment of loving care as would have satisfied a more exacting invalid. Two luxuries she would have wherever she pitched her tent: her open fire-place, with its blazing logs, and her window-stand of flowers. Her "pet old-maidisms," she said they were, and insisted upon paying for them herself. She could have afforded to indulge many and more extravagant whims, being the mistress of a snug fortune in her own right. Her dress was always handsome and in the prevailing mode; her apartments well furnished and exquisitely neat.

"It is bad enough to drag my visitors up an additional flight of stairs to behold a fleshless atomy," was one of her sayings—"without chilling them by the appointments of a hospital and the gloom of a genteel family vault."

She kept open doors here, therefore, her face as sunny as the sky in fair weather, as cheery always as the blaze upon the hearth, and to her was continual resort of those who needed counsel and sympathy. Mrs. Darling came to con-

sult about dress-making and cookery and social requirements and mooted points of etiquette. Her husband read the "Post," every evening by "Evy's" lamp, toasting his slippered feet upon the fender, and discussed the leading topics of the paper and times, with the vivacious little being who seldom saw the outside of the house from the beginning to the end of winter, and sometimes did not stir beyond the threshold of her chamber for weeks together. The children trooped in and out, all day long, with broken knees and fractured toys to be pitied and repaired, bruised heads and injured feelings, capital jokes and direful woes that could be appreciated so well by no one else as Aunt Evy. She loved and spoiled all, serving each as faithfully and zealously as if she had no one else upon the globe upon whom to pour out the riches of her affectionate sympathy and helpful offices. That she had a favorite, however, she was too honest to conceal. That nobody carped at the preference was a proof how truly the rest loved her and the object of her partiality.

"They are all passing dear," she said, once, to me, "I hardly know which is the mother—Mrs. Darling or I. But Ailsie? Ah, that is quite a different matter. She is my twin!"

I could easily comprehend, when I knew her well, the nature and strength of the tie; as easily trace in the niece's peculiar phraseology her habits of thought,—especially in the mixture of sparkling fun and profoundest earnestness that was a never-old entertainment to me—the formative agency of the aunt's companionshp and teachings.

"If people would not excruciate my taste and sensibilities by calling the most original child born into the world during this century—'old-fashioned,' it would be a relief and a boon," she complained. "When her fashion is all her own, and uncopyable!"

She was inclined to be quiet, on this evening in mid-December, lying in the invalid's chair which she had asked me to lower for her, when she stopped knitting,—only saying a word, here and there, to show that she heard and enjoyed what was going on between Ailsie and myself, or laughing —the soft, liquid gurgle of amusement that was more like infantine glee than the mirth of one who had lived in this world forty years, and could "just remember" what it was to be free from pain.

Ailsie and I were having what she denominated "one of our good talks." It was not every day, or every week, that she condescended to accept a seat upon my knee. She never did it when others besides Aunt Evy were by, being, at once, the least shy and the most modest child I ever saw. To-night, she had invited herself to occupy that perch, and while she talked, played with my hands, my sleeve-buttons and those of my coat—counting, "rich man, poor man, merchant, thief," up one side, and down the other, varying the entertainment by an occasional pull at my hair if I teased or contradicted her.

"All the leaves must be off the bower," she was saying. "And the creek frozen. And the trout—(poor prince isn't there now!) what do you suppose has become of them? And the hop-toads and spiders?"

"Gone into winter quarters," quoth I. "With mud-blankets and sod comfortables. If your dear friends the spiders hadn't wasted their time making ball-dresses for the fairies, in the summer, they might now be asleep in beds with lace curtains and cambric sheets."

The idea pleased her fancy, and she paused to cogitate upon it.

"It does seem," she said, slowly, as "if they might have done something like that. Built cunning little houses under ground. Wee bits of palaces—and lined them with silk, and had thistle-down beds."

"And stoves and gas-chandeliers!" I interpolated, and got my ears pinched.

"I can see just the kind of house I am going to live in when I am grown up," she pursued, staring into the fire. "It shall be almost out of town, where I can have a garden and rabbits and Guinea-fowls and a dozen jolly little pigs with curly tails and pink noses. Oh! and a pony, and deers and fishes, and as many birds as the trees will hold. There will be a piazza all around the house, and windows down to the floor, and ever so many rooms down-stairs. So's Aunt Evy won't have to climb steps. One room shall be all white; another all pink, another blue. I'll have a piano in every one. And a greenhouse."

"In *every* room?"

"Be quiet!" she ordered, petulantly. "My houses tumble down when any body speaks. It breaks the charm. That one has gone for ever and a day."

"I'll build you a better, some time," I proposed. "When I am a rich doctor, with the street in front of my office blocked up with the carriages of people who want me to cure them. You shall have rooms furnished with all the colors of the rainbow, and no end of flowers and gold-fish, and as many singing-birds as heart could wish, not forgetting a damp corner in the garden for a select number of lovely hop-toads, and a garret, where the spiders' webs shall never be disturbed. As to pianos, and such-like trifles, they will be a drug. You won't be able to move without catching your dress in a harp-string or treading upon a guitar."

"Who will play upon them all?"

"Aunt Evy and you and I."

"Ah! *you* will live with us too,—will you? That would be splendid!"

"If you will let me," I responded, seriously. "But you will have to marry me first."

I expected a cuff or a tweak of the ear. But she stopped trifling with my coat-buttons, and became profoundly meditative, her head on one side, her eyes again upon the coals.

Aunt Evy's laugh disturbed the brown study.

"What do you say to that, Midget?"

"I don't know but what it might do very well!" she answered, with unflattering hesitation. "I shall have to marry somebody. And so many people advise me not to marry papa. They say it 'tisn't custom-er-rary. Mamma might feel badly about it, too. It *would* be something like Leah and Rachel. I am very fond of you, and you would treat

me well. I did think once I would marry a minister. They are poor as poverty, always, but they don't drink! I've been afraid, all my life, I should marry a drun*kerd*. Papa read at prayers, this morning, about the men persessed with devils that tore their clothes and were "exceeding fierce." I think that's the matter with drunkerds. It's just the way they behave. They are persessed with devils."

"Bad spirits, certainly," said I, jocularly.

She was immovably grave. "It would be better for me to die, now, while I'm sure to go to heaven, than to grow up and marry a man who was persessed."

"Always the same bugbear!" murmured Aunt Evy to me. "I ask myself, often, what it can portend."

"You had better take me, Ailsie," I urged. "I'll sign the pledge to-morrow. Let me see! How does it run?

'We do not think
We'll ever drink
Brandy or rum,
Or anything that makes drunk come.'

"I promise it all if you'll say that you will marry me."

She ruminated yet more solemnly, weighing the proposal as its moment deserved.

"I *should* like to get it off my mind for good and all," she confessed. "It has been a great bother. Four other gentlemen have begged me to marry them. Very nice gentlemen, too. Good enough for anybody's lovers. But I had papa in my head, and hadn't been told any better, and I

sent them off. After all, I didn't like any of them as well as I do you. You suit me uncommonly well. Aunt Evy likes you, and papa and mamma think the world of you."

"You see what a comfortable arrangement it would be all around, then," pursuing my advantage. "You suit *me* uncommonly well. I like Aunt Evy, and think the world of papa and mamma. Say you'll take me, Ailsie, and get the bother off both our minds."

She was not quite won. The sense of what belonged to her sex was inborn and potent.

"I wonder what Clarine would say," was her next objection. "She might be hurt if I was engaged first."

"Don't let that stand in your way," observed Aunt Evy. "I had a letter yesterday from Clarine." This was the eldest daughter, who was spending the winter with some Western friends. "I should not be surprised, from what she says, if she brought somebody home in the Spring, to ask papa's consent to her return with him. But that is a secret, for the present."

"Certainly," nodding sagaciously. "Family affairs. I hope she will get a handsome husband and be very happy."

"And you will make me very happy by giving me a handsome little wife?" I returned to the charge.

"O dear!" The coquette in miniature tossed her head pettishly. "How insisting you are! I have a great mind to say 'No!'"

"Ailsie, the very thought of it breaks my heart!"

She got down from my knee.

"Stand up!" imperiously.

I obeyed, taking a military attitude, head and shoulders back, hands straight down at my sides. She retired some paces, put her hands behind her, and scrutinized me.

"There is a great deal of you!" she remarked dubiously, presently.

"So much the better for your part of the bargain!" I retorted. "It isn't every day you can get six feet in exchange for four."

"You'll be getting handsomer all the while," was her next move. She was a mad lover of personal comeliness. "I heard mamma tell Aunt Evy so yesterday. She said you would envelope into a noble man."

"Ailsie, you tell-tale!" cried her aunt threateningly.

I bowed profoundly. "I shall make it a point, with the busy bee, to improve my manly beauty every shining hour."

"No joking!" she frowned. "There is no fun in this matter. Are you *puf*-feck-ly sure that you want to marry me?"

I put my hand to my heart.

"As sure as that I carry your image in this bosom, Princess Ailsie."

"You will always love me as well as you do now?"

"Better, if that were possible."

"Never be cross or uncomfortable?"

"Not while the stars shine and the rivers roar."

"Will let me have my own way when it's good for me?"

"Yes—and when it is not, if you will."

"Aunt Evy may live with us?"

"From the first of January to the thirty-first of December."

"Then—" after a pause meant to be tantalizing—"we'll call it settled."

"Seal it with a kiss, Ailsie."

She averted her face with coy dignity as I stooped toward her, and extended her hand to receive the salute. I dropped to one knee to perform the act of allegiance, Queen Mab looking on in intense amusement.

"I knocked at the door and thought I heard Miss Mari's voice say 'Come in!' said pleasant accents in the rear of the group. "Was I mistaken?"

I was on my feet with a spring. Ailsie snatched away her hand. Even Aunt Evy, who was rarely off her guard, uttered a slight exclamation.

"Why, Bessie Barnes! you stole in upon us like a ghost! We did not hear you, but you are none the less welcome on that account. Miss Barnes, allow me to present my friend, Mr. Haye. Barry! may I trouble you to light the gas?"

I gathered from this that Miss Barnes was hardly upon what Mrs. Stowe calls, "a footing of undress intimacy" with our small hostess. I had met girls there at twilight whose calls were allowed to run out to the close without other illumination than the rising and falling fire-light. Like other single ladies and invalids, Aunt Evy had "whims," and one of these was the delicate gradation of greetings that were always civil and friendly, from frank affection down to

politeness for the sake of politeness and her own self-respect. I judged that Miss Barnes stood about midway on the scale.

She was very pretty. That I discovered at a glance. Her eyes were hazel and marvellously expressive ; her hair chestnut ; her nose straight ; teeth white and even with an engaging trick of surprising the beholder by gleaming in sudden smiles between two red lips, and her complexion was like the petals of a freshly moulded wax lily.

"Pure Parian," said I to myself, noting how faint, exquisite lights shone through its paleness, as she talked or laughed. "A perfect piece of workmanship!"

Like Ailsie I had an eye for personal beauty, and used both of mine to excellent purpose in the ensuing half-hour. Perhaps this is why I have such a nebulous recollection of what she talked about. Her voice was very sweet, with round tones, and rather languid modulations that were more Southern than Northern. She was apparently an enthusiastic admirer of Aunt Evy, although her effusiveness did not transcend the limits of good taste.

Ailsie had betaken herself to a stool on the other side of the fireplace from the visitor, and said not one word while she stayed. This did not impress me as significant at the time, because she was subject to these fits of quiet attention, during which the passage of her intelligent eyes from one speaker to another declared her every sense to be on the alert. Her withdrawal from Miss Barnes's vicinity and impenetrable reserve, meant only that she would rather look and

listen than talk, or be talked to. She wore a crimson dress, that evening, or a deep wine-color, with a full skirt that fell into graceful folds about her knees, and to her ankles, showing her pretty feet. Her Uncle Wynant described her, in sporting phrase, as "clean-limbed," and I thought of it whenever I saw her walk or dance. The plumpness belonging to robust childhood did not disguise the trim shapeliness that promised to become lithe elegance in the woman. Her hands were crossed in her lap, and she sat perfectly erect, never vouchsafing more than a glance in my direction, and that demurely expressionless. I tried to catch her eye once or twice, but failed signally, and to me comically. The studied propriety of my newly affianced could not have been surpassed by a "model of her sex" ripe with the seasoning of ten campaigns.

Miss Barnes talked away gayly, and Aunt Evy seconded her, until the clock on the mantel struck six.

"Can it be!" exclaimed the younger lady, taking out her watch. "That naughty brother of mine was to call for me at half-past five. He has forgotten me, beyond the shadow of a doubt—the careless boy! Ah, Mr. Haye! the best of brothers are ruined for all sisterly use, lost to their families and general society by the frightful accidents called "matrimonial engagements." Fred used to be a nonesuch of an escort for me, and I was so vain as to believe that nobody could usurp my place. Now, I pledge you my word, he does not remember my existence once in twenty-four hours, unless I am bodily present to his eyes, and then he

passes me over with an abstracted stare as if I were the moon."

"Excuse me!" I said, deferentially; "but do you consider that an unnatural mistake?"

A flat compliment and flatter witticism, but she accepted it merrily.

"Thank you!" sweeping me a courtesy, that would have been a burlesque of gratitude but for its winsome grace. The white teeth were visible in a brilliant line hardly seen before it was gone. "It is easy to see whose pupil he is, Miss Marr," smiling at Aunt Evy. "You cannot do better than to prosecute your studies in this seminary of the graces, Mr. Haye. Some of her graduates have the most enchanting manners, and they do get off the prettiest things imaginable. We all know they are at second-hand, and tell them so, but even at that, their *bons mots* are preferable to anything that originates in the masculine cranium."

"The brain is then the fountain-head of gallantry?" I said, interrogatively. "We stupid men are in the habit of claiming for the homage we pay at the shrine of the fair, the merit of heart-parentage."

"That is an exploded error. Every girl in her teens knows better than to trust your fine words, or yourselves. But I must positively go!"

I arose with her, and stepped back into a side-room for my hat and overcoat.

"If you please!" remonstrated Miss Barnes, a few hurried steps bringing her close to me, at my re-appearance.

"I *beg* you will not feel called upon to play deliverer to this forsaken maiden! I am not in the least timid, at any time, and this evening I have an eminently courageous fit upon me. Then, there are always the very civil policemen to call upon, if one *should* get nervous. I prefer to go home alone! You may look incredulous, but I do! I won't flatter you by pretences of shrinking delicacy. I am the most candid creature in the universe."

She was laughing all over her face. Her eyes were upon mine, and I being so much the taller of the two, she had to raise them at a bewitching angle. Her teeth were a-gleam with fun; rosy flames flickered through the Parian complexion, and amidst these, two of the archest, divinest dimples that ever ensnared heart and fancy played hide-and-seek.

In the *Spectator's* "Bill of Mortality of Lovers," we find these entries:

"Ned Courtley presenting Flavia with her glove (which she had dropped on purpose), she received it, and took away his life with a curtsey.

"Musidorus—slain by an arrow that flew out of a dimple in Belinda's left cheek."

I was doubly dispatched; nay, trebly; done to my death.

Yet the aromatic pain of such dying were worth a thousand lives, provided one might perish with the dear, fatal rose in sight.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### HASHEESH.

I FELL in love, then, with Bessie Barnes, out of hand, and irretrievably. I will not be positive that the pretty alliteration did not aid in the work so speedily and effectually done.

I take to myself due credit for my prompt appreciation of my condition and honorable surrender to my captor. Some men make feeble fight, while conscious of their enslavement. Others deny persistently to themselves the fact that they are no longer their own masters, and therefore ignore the odds against their ever regaining their liberty. I was young, and despite a constitutional inclination to dreaminess and morbid musings, I could hardly have been reckoned as over-susceptible to Love's wiles or assaults. I had never felt the symptoms I was so quick to recognize, before, even in the incipient stages of school-boy passion or puppy-adoration. Yet in respect to coquettes and their arts I was at twenty-one as unsophisticated as was Caspar Hauser, when found standing painfully upon the rounded soles of his pulpy feet in the market-place, blinking at the unknown daylight. From the time I left off

petticoats I had preferred books to society, and shunned ladies—young ones, especially—while at school and college, with more than the usual dread common to hobbledehoydom. It should have been to me a convincing proof of the humanizing yet bracing influence of the summer's associations and Aunt Evy's tuition, that I had met a popular belle without the disposition to run away, and bandied compliments with her for three minutes before the twin darts from courtesy and dimple penetrated to my vitals, and I fell at her feet as Holofernes before Judith, or Sisera before inhospitable Jael.

Figuratively. Seen by the outward eye, I stood upright, civilly, yet not servilely insisting upon my right to see my enslaver to the home, honored beyond all other earthly habitations (but this I said inwardly) in being her abiding-place. More glances, courtesies and dimples were so much superfluous ammunition, but she did not grudge them. I said "Good-night" to Miss Marr, replying incoherently, I dare say, to her query whether I would not return and sup with her. I believe I intimated, and lied, in so doing, that "they" would be disappointed if I did not put in an appearance at home, about tea-time. My hasty response meant nothing beyond aversion to viewing the blissful Now as limitable by vulgar times and seasons.

On the first landing, I recollected that I had not taken leave of Ailsie, nor so much as looked at her in leaving the room. I will be so far just to myself as to assert that I should probably have made some sort of apology to my companion, and run back to repair the slight, had she not been in the

middle of a sentence which lasted all the way down-stairs; an impulse seized—no, touched me, in the lower hall, to call out a pleasant "Good-by, Ailsie dear!" I should like to think that I had opened my mouth to do this when Miss Bessie accosted me.

"Have you a pin to spare? The walking is detestable. I must pin up my dress, if I am to take your arm."

Take my arm! Flexors and extensors were steel at the suggestion. I could have borne her fairy weight—one hundred and twenty avoirdupois—to the world's end, or hewed through a posse of "very civil policemen." Then the sweet artlessness of the declaration that she was under my protection, the ingenuous acceptance of my escort and all it implied of guard, support, devotion—stamped her as true and noble woman. The alternate heats and thrills radiating from the heart to the remotest fibers of digits and pedals, almost robbed me of my speech and memory. It was as much as I could do to recollect in which vest-pocket I carried the small "bachelor's" pincushion fashioned for me by Ailsie, last week. Producing it after fumblings and delays that earned for me another glimpse of the gleaming pearls between the rose-leaves of the "perfect lips," I offered it silently—reverently

It was heart-shaped and made of black velvet,—with "B" on one side, "H" on the reverse, worked with gold thread by Aunt Evy. But the uneven stitches, crowding upon and overlapping one another around the edges, were set by solicitous little fingers whose owner had wrought in with every one a loving thought of me that lent force to the thrust of

the needle through quadruple folds. The same fingers had stuck the heart all around with pins for my use. I had not been able, up to this moment, to make up my mind to remove one of them. I held it out to Miss Barnes as readily as I would have tendered the palpitating organ thumping against my arm, and invited her to stick pins into that, had it been practicable to get it outside of my ribs, and she had asked me to do her the trifling favor.

She made a bootless peck at a pin's head with her gloved fingers.

"Pshaw! what a nuisance a glove is!" and she completed my distraction by stripping off, with a charming show of fury, the primrose-colored integument of her right hand, and attacking the pins successfully with bare digits. Filbert-nailed, pink-tipped, taper rolls of snow, joined to a palm it made one's mouth water to behold! Lived there a man—a creature of tan and sinews and palpable knuckles and joints, of beard and broadcloth—who could ever aspire to the honor of possessing this thing of wonder and beauty, and winning for his heart and home, a joy forever!

My breath went clean away for a whirling second. I held fast to the velvet heart, however, and let my charmer tug with mirthful *moues*, and pretty puckers of eyebrows, at the pins. Ailsie had pushed them in very far, and the stitches were so near together that they stuck fast, and the pink tips, backed by the nut-shaped nails, had to pull valiantly to extract them. I had sense enough left not to volunteer the help of fingers that were all thumbs beneath her eyes. Nor

could I have seen a single pin's head distinctly. Unaided—and unhindered—by me, she pinned up her draperies in the handiest, and most modest manner conceivable. Not a thread's width of the white underskirt could be seen, and one had only chance and fleeting glimpses of a jaunty gaiter, enclasping—such a foot!

> "Her feet beneath her petticoat,
> Like little mice, peep in and out
> As if they feared the light—"

went around and around in a brain that was spinning too fast for safety before their appearance upon the scene. O rare Sir John Suckling! shrewd and kindly wert thou in prophecy as in history of lovely conceits and the intoxicating effects of beauty. I got the front door open—which was a mercy in itself, and due more to accident than dexterity—and we passed into the outer night together, as truly *tête-à-tête* as we would have been on Juan Fernandez before the discovery of the uncomfortable footprint in the sand, and this while the streets were resounding with steps and voices. Pressley Darling met us under a street-lamp near his own door; raised his hat to my companion, and looked, I fancied, quizzically at me. He was an incorrigible tease, but I was invulnerable to fear of persecution from any source while Bessie (I had got to *that* in my thoughts) grasped my arm more tightly preparatory to launching herself upon the muddy crossing.

"We shall have to establish ferries—or station Sir Walter

Raleigh at the street-corners before winter is over," she said, on the other side, stamping her dainty gaiters with bewitching energy upon the sidewalk.

Internally I anathematized the substitution, on the part of fashion, of tight-fitting, be-buttoned and be-sleeved surtouts for the graceful Spanish cloak it would have been the act of a moment to disengage and fling bridge-wise over the quagmire. As to ferries! Hildebrand might have preserved one grain of charity for Uncle Kôhlebörn in memory of the time when he bore Undine through the knee-deep and rising torrent.

I believe I replied that "such neglect on the part of the municipal authorities was a disgrace to the corporation,"—or words to that effect. Some benevolent agency that was not common-sense withheld me from the expression of the daring suggestions I have hinted at as rife in my brain—or heart. I could no more have decided which was the seat of the sensations mastering reason, than I would willingly have gone back to the estate of ignorance and unconsciousness, but, as I now felt, real misery, that was mine prior to twenty minutes past five o'clock this blessed afternoon of December 15th, in the year of our Lord, 18—.

It was a foggy evening of a decidedly bilious complexion, and, if I must speak plainly, unsavory odor. Bessie called my attention to the peculiar state of the atmosphere. Else, I should have said that the flaggings were "thick inlaid with patines of bright gold." She would have me stop several times to observe the yellow halo encircling the gas-lights,

like the nimbus about a saintly head by one of the old masters, in which the glory is curdled by three centuries' keeping. What was my idea of a "London particular?" asked the sprightly beauty, her spirits, like her loveliness, proof against damp and chill. She had heard it said, laughing heartily, that it was more like pea-soup than anything else. Had I never been abroad? Then, I would think none the less of her for confessing that neither had she. It was her darling desire to see the Old World; Paris, in particular. Should she ever marry, she would insert in the marriage contract, a clause to the effect that the bridal tour should be to Europe.

"That would be delightful," I said, unable, for the life of me, to frame anything anything less commonplace, so profound was my immediate absorption in the calculation of a young physician's possible profits in the first year's practice.

It would scarcely justify the expense of a double passage over the Atlantic and corresponding expenditures on the other side, I feared.

She allayed the smart of the misgiving by adding, with sweet considerateness, that to secure such a pleasure one would be willing to wait a long time. Indeed, to be candid—hadn't she told me already that she was the frankest girl that ever breathed?—to be candid, she did not believe in very early marriages, and quite doted upon long engagements. She had many more serious reflections upon these subjects than people gave her credit for. She could not confide them to everybody. Most elderly persons were so unsympathetic, and a majority of girls in this day were *so* sordid

and calculating, and given to uncharitable judgment of other women! Her idea was—

"But dear me! I am forgetting that you were an utter stranger to me, an hour since. Although, to be sure, I have heard so much about you from that lovely Miss Marr, my better angel, I name her, that it seems as if I had known you for years."

I cleared my throat. The fog had got into it, I think. Something closed up the windpipe.

"You are very good to say so. I, too, find it difficult to believe that we were ever strangers."

"It is you who are good now! You don't know how entirely that sets my scruples aside, how easy and confidential it makes me feel. I was going to say, when I remembered how shocked prudent people (don't that word come from prude?) would be at my doing it, that in my opinion, while there is much truth in the theory of kindred souls, and matches made in heaven, and all that kind of thing, those designed for one another by Providence, should, as soon as they suspect that this is so, begin to prepare themselves, spiritually and mentally, for that union. Tupper says, or somebody told me he said it, I never saw the book—'If thou art to have a wife of thy youth, she is now living upon the earth. Therefore, pray for her.' Not, as a witty friend of mine interprets it: 'pray that you may get her'—but that she may be good and wise and fit for you. And he might have said, 'Pray that thou mayst be made worthy of so good a wife.'"

"Those are noble sentiments!" said I, enthusiastically.

Her depth of thought and elegance of diction were as captivating as her beauty of feature and poetry of motion. How happened it that this rare and radiant maiden had lived in the same city with myself, perhaps ever since the world was brightened by her birth, and the lines of our existence had never crossed? Were there no indexical heart-nerves to make me magnetically aware that she *was*, and near me? To few men is it given to behold the incarnation of the ideal upon which have been expended the thoughts and fancies of years of waiting and longing. This fortune was mine and I had come into my kingdom in the very spring-time of my manhood.

Another crossing—most sloppy and miry of all. I supported her over it as skilfully as I could; first, planting my foot in the muddiest spots, and partly persuading, partly compelling her to tread on my instep, while, by taking both hands, I assisted her in an airy leap to firmer standing-ground. The gaiters came to grief in the transit. She looked dolorously down at them in the yellow light on the farther corner.

"Do you never wear India-rubber overshoes?" questioned I, as mournful as herself over the damage.

"Never if I can help it! the great lumbering things! I walk in them as if shod with lead."

I could comprehend how a very light clog would embarrass the feet that skimmed the puddles like a petrel's. But the instincts of my profession—that-was-to-be—were aroused.

"Are you aware that you risk your valuable health—

and—" I just made out to say it—"life itself by getting your shoes damp?"

"What a tremendous warning! and uttered in a tremendous way!" she smiled, her eyes grappling my silly soul, and forcing it to the surface of mine.

It took a long time to beat and scrape the clay from the soles and sides of the boots, and we were still within the area of the gamboge light, the fog curtaining us from all but the nearest passers-by. She waited until the task was completed before adding seriously, even sadly:

"I may regard life as the choice possession you seem to think it, at some future date. I do not, now."

"It is of inestimable value to others!" returned I, vehemently, as we walked on.

"*J'en doute. À qui, par exemple?*"

How lucky that I understood spoken French! How awkward that I could not speak it! My English was the clash of rusty iron, after a silver chime.

"To those who love you!"

Was I misled by my own agitation, or did the hand upon my arm shake? She did not reply directly. When she spoke it was doubtfully.

"And you imagine that they are many?"

"They should be!"

At heart I was fierce with the thought that any other man should dare look at her admiringly. I would have rejoiced to strangle him who should cast loving eyes upon her. But the truth had to be spoken. No one with a heart in his

bosom and warm blood in his veins could fail to love her fondly,—were he young and passionate, madly.

"Wait and see!" she answered, with an obvious effort to resume our gay strain. "This is my home! Come in—won't you?"

Nine-hundred-and-ninety-nine women in every thousand would have worded the invitation very differently, had they given it at all in the circumstances. Her frankness was a delicious contrast to the conventionalities that governed her sex as a body, said the modern Caspar to the inflated ignoramus he knew as his inner self.

"You are kind—too kind!" Her eyes had dragged me up the steps and her hand was upon the bell-knob. "I appreciate your great goodness. But I should not presume to do so, yet. If you will allow me to call at some other time—"

"As often and as soon as you like!"

Without ringing the bell, still holding the knob, she faced me.

"I mean that. As often as you like! Come whenever you want to come. When you do not, you will oblige me by pleasing yourself. If you care at all to come in, now, say so without fear or favor. One and all, we in this house are sworn enemies of useless ceremonies. My mother—you see I understand *les moyens et les mœurs*—will be glad to receive you, Mr. Haye, as my friend and as Miss Marr's friend, and overjoyed to see you drink a cup of her choice tea, now, or at any time. My father will shake hands and bid you

welcome; tell you that the weather is foggy and the times dull, and forget all about you, two minutes thereafter, behind his newspaper. My brother 'did a-wooing go,' this afternoon, thus obliging you to be here at this hour, 'whether *your* mother would or no.' You behold, before you, the residue of the family party you dread to encounter. Will you enter—or, go away?"

She rang the bell.

Of course, I followed her into a lighted and carpeted hall, and obeyed when she showed me that my hat and surtout were to hang upon the bronze rack that stood there.

"Now!"

With the most seraphic smile she had yet bestowed upon her slave, she signaled me to attend her into the parlor.

A bald-headed gentleman with gold spectacles astride of his nose, read a newspaper by the centre-table. A lady, with a dressy cap set above a very black front of curls, was dozing in a corner arm-chair.

"Papa!" said Bessie, convoying me to the front. "My friend and Miss Evelyn Marr's very particular friend, Mr. Haye, who most benevolently escorted me home when Fred had forgotten me. He has kindly consented to stay to tea, mamma."

She waved me to a seat when the predicted welcomes were over, and saying, "Excuse me for a few minutes!" floated away.

Mr. Barnes and I had considered the weather—fog included—exhaustively, and were edging toward politics be-

fore the return of the household fairy. I had even had time to collar and shake myself, mentally, and ask my sober consciousness how I got into this house, and what I proposed to myself by staying there. I had intended definitively—if my memory were faithful in recalling resolutions antedating the beatitude of my Now—to spend this evening with Aunt Evy. I had left upon her table a book I had carried to her that afternoon, with the proposal that I should read it aloud, beginning after supper that very night. My presence in Mrs. Barnes's parlor was a breach of faith with her. My acceptance of the invitation to tea was an infraction of the simplest rules of social etiquette. I was no society man, but I had taken in many such facts, by absorption, having lived for twenty-one years in an atmosphere of good breeding. It may have been the unfamiliar furniture and pattern of the carpet; perhaps the style of Mrs. Barnes's head-dress, so dissimilar to that worn by my stepmother, and yet more unlike Mrs. Darling's breakfast-caps and evening lappets of fine lace —that prompted me to this spasm of common sense. Whatever brought it on, it was the last seizure of the kind until the end of the nine days' run of fever.

Scruples, misgivings, regrets, vanished as mists at a rush of westerly winds, leaving blue depths overhead and a flood of glory over all the earth, with the reopening of the parlor doors. I seemed to have been born and bred in that room, and to have lived ecstatically all the days of the years of my life in sight of the looming peak of Mrs. Barnes's turban, by the time Bessie swam around before me, superseraphic in a

pink silk robe and tulle cape. She "always dressed for the evening," but not knowing this important circumstance, at that date, the apparition was doubly dazzling.

We went into supper shortly, and my chair was opposite Bessie's. My impression is that the table was bountifully spread—profusion that sacrificed taste to abundance. I recollect more clearly that Mrs. Barnes—now awake, yet disposed to taciturnity—pressed every dish upon me again and yet again, with gestures more urgent than words, until I made it a rule to decline nothing. Most distinct is my remembrance of the ambrosial flavor of all that entered my mouth, for I was continually catching Bessie's eye, and warming into more zestful relish of life under her smile. We had the tea-table conversation to ourselves. Mr. Barnes read all the while he was gulping down cups of scalding tea and bolting fried oysters, and eating custards with a dessert-spoon. His wife was quietly hungry, besides being as diligently as she was dumbly hospitable. It was very unlike a meal with the Darlings. I noticed that, even then. But the beauteous being exactly across the board, shedding the effulgence of her orbs into my soul, made amends for all deficiencies, harmonized discrepancies. How she would glorify a home of her own! In the genuine missionary spirit, I panted for the opportunity to see her rightly placed—to make the setting worthy of the gem.

The cream of the evening arose for my delectation with our withdrawal from the *débris* of the feast, to the parlor. The elders with amiable discretion remained in the supper-

room. I did not mean to pry into family reserves, but I could not avoid seeing, while bowing to Bessie to precede me from the apartment, that Mr. Barnes passed his cup to his wife for a fifth replenishment, and hearing his order to the servant to "bring in another plate of waffles." It was clear to me already, although our acquaintance was not three hours old, that Bessie's will was the law of the household, whenever she chose to exert authority. In view of this, it should, according to my estimate of my divinity, have been a perfectly-ordered establishment. Whereas, I cannot deny that the only order of things seemed to be that of liberty of action and bodily solacement.

Bessie was the embodiment of both, as she took possession of a semi-chair, semi-divan, which she told me was made expressly for her. It was luxurious to a charm—a marvellous construction of springs and padding, rosewood and leaf-brown satin, and her *pose* within it was also a marvel. We sat in the back-parlor, devoted, she gave me to understand, to her evening use—"when she cared to be particularly lazy."

There were two sofas, and besides her *causeuse*, two easy chairs. The windows were heavily curtained; there were pictures, and upon a tripod in a corner, a statuette of Silence with her finger upon her lip. A fluffy rug was before the glowing grate. At Bessie's left hand was a stand bearing a vase of flowers. The shades of the chandelier were of softly-clouded glass. Beyond three or four cushions laid here and there on the floor, there was no other furniture in

the room than that I have described. It was a place in which to rest and dream—and love.

"I am afraid you will have a stupid evening," said Bessie, looking at me under drooping lids that veiled—not dulled her eyes, the dimples glancing in and out, while her mouth was drawn down in affected commiseration. "The pea-soup is thicker than when we were out. It is not likely that any one will venture through it for the doubtful delight of seeing me. It is a pity, for I have some pleasant friends whom you would enjoy meeting."

"*That* is the doubtful delight," rejoined I. "The fog is a godsend. I desire no society except that which I have."

"Do you mean it?" abruptly unveiling the twin globes of light, and giving me such a benefit as made my wits reel again. The quinine and brandy I had imbibed during my spell of typhoid had never made me half so crazy.

"I do! I should wish my dearest friend at the antipodes were he to enter now."

"Please pull that bell-rope?" she asked in the same abrupt way.

I obeyed, slightly startled and altogether at a loss as to what was coming next. A maid appeared, to whom her young mistress gave this order:

"If any one—no matter who—calls this evening, say that I am not at home. Now," turning to me with irresistible grace—"you must be very agreeable—fascinating, indeed, to recompense me for my possible losses. I will grant you five minutes' grace in which to arrange your ideas."

I needed it all, and more.

The coal was heaped high in the grate; white and violet flames quivering up to the apex of the pile; the radiance from the chandelier favored the finest points of the picture beneath, making more pure the complexion, darkening the eyes, and casting over neck and the lower part of the face a tender flush, I was not cool enough to see, was the reflection from the sheeny pink silk.

"Cool!" I was a college-boy—raw in years and experience—by nature affectionate, but who had but lately learned to taste the delights of home and friendship. The Darlings had "drawn me out," most beneficially to myself, so far as my intercourse with them was concerned. For the rest, discretion could come from experience alone.

The streets were unusually quiet. One could imagine the veil of fog closing about the room, in whose glowing centre we sat, to seclude us from curious or indifferent intruders. Bessie, her cheek on her hand, leaned back in her lounging-chair and studied the rings on the hand that reposed in the pink silk nest of her lap, like an alabaster cast in jeweler's cotton.

I, from the "conversation chair" at her right, sat up straight and studied her, in entrancement approximating delirium, and repeated more love-verses to myself than I had believed that I had ever read or heard.

"Well?" said a languidly sweet voice, presently, and I knew the five minutes' grace was past.

I laughed, foolishly. It was awkward, this peremptory

draft upon my powers of fascination, and I shirked incontinently in the very glow of gratified vanity, proposing, bunglingly, that we "should have some music."

"I need not ask if you sing," jumping up with alacrity. "But the piano is in the other room, isn't it?"

It was, and the folding doors were closed between the parlors.

Bessie did not move so much as her head. The alabaster hand nestled, stirless, in its silken nook.

"Not a note!" she declared calmly. "I don't know one tune from another. The piano is for the use of visitors. You are welcome to try it, if you have a liking for a musical jingle. It is in fair tune, so Fred says."

I stammered a hasty disclaimer, aud resumed the seat set at an attractive relative position to hers.

"One takes it for granted that all young ladies play and sing, and like to be asked to do it," said I, asininely.

She lifted her pretty brows.

"Ah! but you see, my good sir, I am not an accomplished young lady. I can manage some dozen phrases of French, can spell and write decently, *et voilà tout.* Except to be happy all day long. Nor do I like to do things for no better reason than because I am expected to do them. Half the fun of life is in disappointing people. Don't you think so?"

"I confess that is an untried experience with me," began I, hesitatingly.

"That is because you are a man. You don't begin to en-

ter into the subtleties of human nature as women do. Said a lady—a pattern woman—to me, the other day :

"'My dear, since you are not musical, do you draw or paint?'

"'No, ma'am,' answered I meekly.

"I am always meek to models.

"'*In*deed! But you are doubtless an adept in fancy work?'

"'I don't even own a thimble or a crochet needle,' said I, fearfully crushed, but sincere to the death.

"'Do you mean to say that you have *no* accomplishments!'"

"'None, except that I always speak the truth, madam.'"

Her laugh pealed out like the springing of a spray of sleigh bells, and I joined in heartily.

Were ever such *naïveté* and sprightliness, such moral and personal graces, united in another creature of mortal mould? How despicable did the thread-bare maneuvres of husband-hunting maidens and calculating mammas appear, beside the guileless frankness that declared herself to be neither useful nor ornamental in the popular acceptation of the term!

"Do you remember the reply of the Persian poet Hafiz, when asked by a utilitarian what was the use of poetry?" I inquired.

She shook her head in charming wilfulness.

"I am an ignoramus. I know nothing from books. You will have the pleasure of telling me. I never forget what is told to me, face to face. If I like the storyteller, that is."

I bowed. "The poet answered by asking, 'What is the use of a rose?' 'To smell,' was the reply. 'And I am good to smell it,' said Hafiz. You have discovered the very poetry of living, Miss Barnes."

"I believe I have," she said, ingenuously. "People make life so hard and earnest! It is all dollars and cents and pork and beans for the strong, mush and molasses for the weak. If I had my way, the world should be one big rose garden, and all the inhabitants thereof butterflies. Your pattern woman, now, would have it a field of buckwheat, and stock it with bees. The "pattern" was a bee, herself, in a former state of existence. All business and sting. Packing away honey by the pound for her own use, and grudging so much as a drop to anybody else."

## CHAPTER IX.

### IN CLOVER.

HE bilious fog was so dense at eleven o'clock, when I tore myself away from the beaming presence enthroned in the leaf-brown satin *causeuse*, that it was strange I did not lose my way irremediably in the walk to my nominal home. I did take wrong crossings and blunder against dead walls, in a style that would have excited damaging suspicions in the minds of beholders, had there been any. I did not meet a dozen men in the half mile separating my paternal mansion from the enchanted palace I had left.

Preoccupied as I was with my novel happiness, and in the celestial masonry known as castle-building, I could not but observe the phenomenal appearance of these few plunging suddenly upon the vision at arm's length, as if projected to the surface of the pea-soup by an unseen ladle. Nor did the increasing unsavoriness of the bilious broth escape my notice—a flavor as if it had been scorched in the boiling, and kept too long afterward. Pavements and brick walls dripped with the unwholesome steam. It beaded my hat and overcoat, and clogged my hair. If any germs of the

fever that had brought me nigh to the grave's mouth were lurking in my system, the odor and dampness were the most favorable conditions for their development. I did not give my own danger a thought. The shadow that sped over my dream-world, as I fitted the latch-key into my father's door, and felt that the panels streamed with wet, was:

"Heavens! what a climate for her to live in! And she never wears rubber overshoes, if she can help it!"

The hall lamp was extinguished. I might be tolerably confident of receiving a step-maternal tirade at breakfast, pathetically rounded by a recapitulation of the various images of dread that beset the sleepless hour preceding my return, wherein burglars, false keys, wayside assassins, gambling-hells and heart-disease—since I was not of an apoplectic build—relieved one another in frightful succession in the matronly imagination. Nevertheless, I trod the perversely creaking stairs—soundless by day—with an undismayed spirit. My panoply was lecture-proof. The supposition that aught mundane save the loss of my lately created hopes could hurt or molest me, exceeded my store of credulity.

My bed-room was cheerless. The chambermaid had left a sash lowered for the space of six inches from the top, after "redding up" in the forenoon, and nobody had cared or thought to close it. The air tasted and smelled and clung like a dilution of the pea-broth outside. Yet I lighted my study-lamp, and pored over Byron for a good hour before my pulses were quiet enough to promise sleep.

Mr. Gilder did not write "The New Day" until a score of years later, or I should have sought no other priest to direct my devotions. Says a sapient critic, with whom it is to be presumed the new day of love has become an old story, "Our only objection to the volume is that no one, save a lover, can enter fully into its beauties."

I would have revelled in its boscages of musk-roses, and rolled ecstatically upon its spice-beds, and drunk to divinest intoxication of its choice vintage; steeped myself to translucency in its sunsets and risings.

I laid me down to think of Bessie until I slept to pursue her in dreams, and awoke at daydawn, to exult anew in the recollection that she was a human entity, and that I loved her. It is idle to relate that, although her house lay in a direction diametrically opposite to the route I should have taken in order to reach college punctually for morning prayers, I passed it in going to my lectures, and re-passed it when the classes were dismissed for the day, at two o'clock. No one was visible about the premises, either time, diligently as I scanned the windows, from the attic half-story to the well-sunken basement. A flutter of Mother Barnes's ribbons would have been some stay to my fainting soul. A section of Bessie's shadow upon a window-blind would have been solid comfort. I was left to such mitigation of my thirst as I could wring from contemplation of the stone steps that last night were pressed by the No. 2 gaiters, French make.

By a blessed slip of her dear, frank tongue, I had learned

at what hour she took her afternoon constitutional, and in what direction. Three o'clock found me dressed within an inch of my life, haunting the square the Barnes house helped to make highly respectable, in a divided agony—the dread of being espied and ridiculed by chance spectators, and the apprehension that my quarry might flit away while my regards were withdrawn from the front door. Fate was more clement than I had dared hope for. At twenty-five minutes-and-a-quarter past three, the oaken (imitation) portal moved upon its hinges, gaped slowly until the open door-way framed for me a vision of one fair woman—Bessie in irreproachable walking costume, pulling on a pair of pearl-gray gloves. They were a neat fit, and being new required such cautious adjustment to each taper finger that I had time to saunter up at a sloth's pace, and lift my hat with as flimsy an affectation of a casual passage through that precinct of the great city as was ever undertaken by fledgeling lover.

The pretence became the essence of fatuity when she tripped down to the side-walk with a nod of welcome.

"Good-afternoon! I saw you go by a while ago—twice—and hoped you were loitering about somewhere, waiting for me."

Denial would have been such useless falsehood that I resigned the idea at once.

"Like Chevy Slyme, round the corner?" I said, falling into step as she took her course up the street.

"Eh? Is that a classical allusion? Then, you'll have to

explain it. I never read English classics. It is too much like work."

"Not even Dickens?"

"Can't abide him! I was sickened out with him in my tender youth, when I rashly undertook to please a literary stripling by reading Oliver Twist. Such low stuff as it was! Now I've shocked you, but I can't help it. If I speak at all I must be sincere."

"Truth is always better than fiction—even Dickens' fancy pictures," replied I, more fervently than the occasion warranted.

She peeped up at me sidewise like a bird—the shy, pleased look of a child, yet full of witchery.

All her lips said was: "How nice and tall you are! A short man is my favorite detestation. You carry yourself well, too—a remarkable thing for one so slight who has grown rapidly."

Had she declared to me in round terms, "You are eminently good-looking, and have the carriage of a gentleman. It pleases me to be seen in your escort," she could not have conveyed the sense of glance and remark more distinctly to my mind. Nor, had I been the vainest of sap-headed coxcombs, could I have been more elated by the flattery.

If questioned, I should, doubtless, have described the progress of the ensuing ninety minutes as a promenade, whereas it was, in truth, a flight such as rational people know in dreams only;—the ineffable flowing—not so gross a

motion as floating—through ambient air of an etherealized personality that has arisen superior to the power of gravitation and the restraints of friction. We wonder, in our dreams, why we have never done it before and always, it is so easy and altogether natural, and resolve never to descend to the ignominious step-by-step upon the rough earth. We do come down, however, in our visions, or at our awakening, and even love cannot soar forever.

My time for descent was not yet. Throughout our interview of that day, my head was as light as a feather, and my heels as light as my head. Our course up-town, down-town, and everywhere rangers, might better be likened to the sailing through aërial space, of a brace of love-birds, holding the opposite ends of a love-knot in their beaks, than to any method of terrestrial locomotion. This was my simile, and had my native frankness equalled Bessie's, I should have made a greater goose of myself by giving it expression. I have not the least recollection of what we talked about, only that when I had become somewhat accustomed to my exaltation, my tongue was more at my command and I could reply, as well as listen.

We said "Good-by," lingeringly, at her door.

There was a family of inquisitive maiden sisters across the way, as I was informed at a later day, who frequented the street windows with such pertinacity that Fred Barnes had named their domicile, "the pigeon-house." Being "proper" and "pattern" women, they were within the pale of Bessie's vindictiveness. In the main she was amiable

generous to a fault when giving did not involve self-denial; placable to everybody after the flurry of resentment for real or supposed injury was over—always excepting prudes. Her antipathy to them was of a violent and incurable type. I believe she would have risked a blight to her own reputation in order to accomplish the disgrace of one of the species. Considering, now, that she could do her opposite neighbors and natural enemies no unkinder turn than to display in their sight a new claimant for her favor as conspicuously as was compatible with a liberal rendering of the proprieties, she kept me talking on the threshold, making of herself a prettier picture than ever, by sidelong and downcast looks and blushes, palpable enough to be visible to the lynx-eyed watchers. Without misgiving as to her motives, I enjoyed her attitudinizing in good faith as long as she would permit me to stay.

"I shall hear of this tableau again—probably a dozen times," she broke off a remark to say, at length. "We have given our friends over the way food for a month's gossip—as I meant we should. Since you won't come in, I won't keep you standing in the cold. *Au revoir!*"

She kissed her glove-tips before shutting the door in my face. I accepted the dismission with the feeling that I was bound to be grateful for something. I could not have brought myself to remind the thoughtless child that she had not once invited me into the house, although she was persuaded that she had and that I had refused. I was afraid—I was sure—that I should have gone in and again partaken of

Mrs. Barnes's glorified tea, and done fresh violence to *les convenances* by remaining upon the hallowed ground until midnight less sixty minutes, had she repaired the omission. Yet I convinced myself that there was a strain of heroic self-abnegation in my forbearing to spur the memory of the ingenuous angel, and to plod homeward through the gathering dusk, to study up for the morrow's lectures.

It was a help to my virtuous resolve to keep before me the goal of earthly hope and endeavor—the prospect of the wedding-trip to Europe. Impatient to be about the business that might—that should—bring this to pass, I hurried through my supper striving to appear sublimely regardless of my sister's queries, and my brother's raillery upon what he described as my "uncommon heavy dyke"— being slang for a "grand get-up," which is slang, one degree more intelligible, for one's best clothes.

My stepmother smiled sourly at the refined badinage. My father did not seem to listen. He was a grave man who never laid aside business even in his sleep—dreaming, as I have heard him say, of stocks and bonds and mortgages. I tried to imitate his mien of genuine indifference, but my forehead flushed darkly at thrust and *équivoque*. Mine had never been a very happy home, yet I doubt if I had ever rated it as positively miserable until that evening. I sat bowed over my table, my head on a fat volume of essays upon Political Economy, for a long time after I went to my room, a prey to alternate fits of rapture and distress as I contrasted the scenes of yester evening with this. Al-

ready, so much of my individuality had slipped away from me that I began to see with Bessie's eyes.

She would find my stepmother staid and crabbed; my sister hoydenish; my brother an unscrupulous tease; my father stern. I painted her fear, her recoil, her aversion, her repentance that she had yielded to my passionate prayer and resigned maiden freedom—her one accomplishment of "being happy all day long," for an abode and associates so uncongenial—and I bewailed the day of my birth.

Then, I vowed to make, by my own might, a home fit for her occupancy; to forswear kindred, and repudiate natural affection, rather than offend her taste, or chill her heart. I had faith in the omnipotence of love and energy and respectable talents; and when I took this survey of the situation I was ready to cry out with delight that I had been born unto so goodly a heritage; opened the lids of the corpulent book and "boned down"—in college classical—to my economical politics. I was working for Bessie, and kept it up until two o'clock A.M.

Hamlet presented himself in Ophelia's sewing-room—

> "his stockings fouled,
> Ungartered, and down-gyved to his ankle,"

and was adjudged by the owlish wiseacre Polonious to be "mad for her love." Benedick sneered bitterly at the desertion of his whilom companion-in-arms who since he had been smitten by Hero, would "lie ten nights awake, carving the fashion of a new doublet." Claudio, in unwitting retal-

iation, when describing the signs of Benedick's passion for Beatrice, says, "he brushes his hat o' mornings."

My love took the tidy turn. I discovered, with concern, that my everyday coat was getting shiny about the elbows, and that the binding was frayed. My stepmother looked well to the ways of her household, but I decided that her laundress should be taken to task for criminal neglect of my shirt-fronts. The tie of the cravat was the crucial test of patience and resolve to appear well in the beloved eye, or perish in the struggle. I had laughed at the tale of Beau Brummell's tableful of "failures." If he were in love it was explicable and pardonable. My hat, like Benedick's, suffered long. The malady would seem, with me, to have struck upwards as determinedly as Hamlet's love-fit settled in his calves. I had discarded the student's cap in November, my stepmother objecting to it as "rakish." I was not fond of my stepmother, but I tried, as a general principle, to keep on the right side of her. To please her, I mounted a beaver, and brushed it occasionally. On the day after my introduction to Elysium—*id est*, the Barnes's back parlor—I took it to the hatter's to be blocked over and ironed. After which deceitful renovation, I was continually seeking out stray nooks and chances where and when I could pull it off and polish it with my coat-sleeves, or blow the dust from the sleek cylinder, or assure myself, by ocular demonstration, that it needed no such affectionate attention. I ran in debt for gloves, and paid officious boot-blacks on hotel-steps, and at miry crossings, for needless "shines." The major portion of my

pocket-money went for flowers and swindling baskets of imported fruit, gotten up regardless of expense at the top, and with equal disregard of honesty at the bottom. But as I dared not disturb the fragrant mosaic of the orange-red and whity-green surface, I was none the wiser, and much the poorer. Bessie "could live on fruit," and "doted upon flowers." What man with a heart in his bosom, and a half-dollar in his pocket, would let her want for either?

I had known her nine days—nine incomparable days, for I had not missed seeing her in one of them. Sunday was the reddest letter of the three-times-three. She had suffered my attendance to and from church in the forenoon. I had found the places in her prayer-book, not without some pains, not having been drilled in Episcopal forms; had stood, sat and kneeled beside her in the pew, tenanted only by ourselves. Papa and Mamma Barnes were not noted church-goers. Her silken skirt overflowed my ankles; the fringe of her velvet sleeve lay upon my arm, during the sermon, and her loosened fur boa slid down, down noiselessly, until it rested on my knee. A sluggish-blooded man behind us complained, after service, that the "church was as cold as a barn." I could have challenged him on behalf of the sexton, who had transferred a Floridian climate to latitude 40°.

"I take a famous nap on Sabbath afternoons," said the candid Peri, at our morning parting. "But if you will promise positively, that you will be in after supper, say about half-past eight, I will be at home to nobody else."

"What stress of weather, battle, murder, and sudden death, could keep me away after that?" said I.

"Fie!" But she did not frown as if she meant it. "You should not quote scripture upon light occasions."

I could not correct her, when she tripped—in another it would have been blundered—in such trifles. Would statistical and literal starch make her more enchanting?

I said merely, "This is a matter of moment and weight," and restored the prayer-book she had let me carry all the way to and from the sanctuary.

About four o'clock, my Sunday dinner having been hearty and my attempted afternoon nap a failure, I strolled around—a matter of four furlongs or so—to satisfy myself that all was right with Beauty's Bower. I did an immense deal of gratuitous police-duty that winter, and was quietly amused when I met a licensed guardian of the public peace sauntering through my beat, at the thought of how much shoe-leather and time he was wasting.

The house *was* all right—except that upon the steps stood a young man. I inventoried him in the twinkling of a jealous eye. Of good height, passable features and easy carriage; faultless in each particular of his fashionable apparel, he glanced with a kind of keen superciliousness at me, flicked his boot with his cane, and drummed with his toe upon the stone step while awaiting the answer to his ring. The sight of him thus and there was a personal grievance, yet there was a glimmer of sardonic mirth in my visage as I contemplated his show of impatience and foresaw the disap-

pointment which was his inevritable portion. Bessie was invisible, until supper-time; afterward she would be at home to but one person, and that not this arrogant dandy. I walked slowly onward purposely and maliciously. I was curious to contrast his crest-fallen bearing with the confident expectation that had nettled me. The concussion of a closing door, familiar to me as the tinkle of the bell which hung beside it, awoke the Sabbath echoes that slept on other days in the much frequented street. The foiled stranger did not overtake me, after receiving his quietus, and I looked over my shoulder to see if he had gone down the street instead.

He had vanished. There was no more trace of him than if he had sunk into the bowels of the coal-vault and the flagstones closed above his head. I wheeled and stood stock still, dumb, amazed, enraged, oblivious of surveillant "pigeons." The block was a long one. He could not have gained the lower corner, unless by precipitate flight, and he did not look like one who would take to his heels in broad daylight. I retraced my steps, scrutinizing every brick and board of the house in passing. Save for the mysterious disappearance of the would-be caller, all was as before. The parlor-shutters were fast and blank. It was almost a certainty that he was not sitting there in the dark. He *dared* not enter the back room uninvited by the genius of the retreat. If I could have improvised an excuse I would have rung the bell, and ended my uncertainty by actual proof of sight and hearing. Failing this, I sought to console myself

with the theory that it might have been the slamming door of the next house which I had heard, he having mistaken the number.

But I had no more stomach for wholesome victuals at supper-time than when Ezra had animadverted upon my lack of "peth." The apparition of the foppish interloper, whom I had succeeded in hating virulently by this time, haunted me. The clanging echo of the too-hospitable door reverberated through my head like a knell. I could not hope to lay the dread by any means short of an explicit explanation with the "frankest girl in the universe."

She had never looked lovelier or been more engaging in demeanor than when I entered her sanctum, that evening. Ensconced in the leaf-brown satin nest, she held out her hand, without rising, with the sweetest of her ever-sweet smiles.

"Five minutes late! In another five, my 'not-at-home' to other people would have been outlawed. You have just saved your distance."

"I thought I might have mistaken my orders," I replied. "I saw a gentleman upon the front steps this afternoon whose countenance seemed to say that you were at home to him, at least."

"I am not responsible for the stamp of masculine conceit upon his face, or any other—" with a curl of the red lip. "But I would have seen him had I been aware that he was here. It was mamma's pet nephew, Nat Wallace. She had him all to herself for an hour. I scolded her well for not

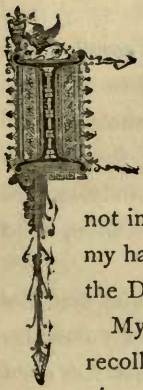
awaking me. I used to love Nat dearly when we were at school together. He lives in Philadelphia, now, and we seldom meet."

I was miserably mortified, so pitiful did my jealousy appear in the light of this simple solution of the mystery I had made for myself,—so fully had I exposed it by my untimely investigation of the very innocent circumstance of a nephew calling upon his aunt on Sabbath afternoon.

I would have essayed an apology, but Bessie mercifully led the talk to some other theme—mercy for which my soul blessed her as the most magnanimous of created intelligences.

## CHAPTER X.

### ROBIN ADAIR.



HAD known Bessie nine days, as I have said, and my passion was at flood-tide, when a great ball was given by one of her acquaintances which she was to attend. Since I was not invited, I found myself with a spare evening on my hands and resolved to devote it to my friends the Darlings.

My foot was upon the steps of the house before I recollected that I had not seen one of the family since I left Aunt Evy's room in Bessie Barnes's company. I was slightly abashed, and more surprised at my apparent remissness. I hoped they would not "make a time" about it. Aunt Evy ought to deal gently with me, for, knowing Bessie as she did, she must suspect the inevitable result of our introduction and subsequent interview. I rang the bell with wonted boldness, having done nothing whereof I should be ashamed. Before it had ceased to tinkle, the door flew back and Ailsie sprang into my arms with an *abandon* of affection she had never exhibited to me before.

"I said it was your ring!" she cried, a dry sob breaking her articulation. "We have been so unhappy about you!

I was sure you were sick again, and wouldn't let us know. Then, papa met your father yesterday, and he said you were well. What *has* been the matter? Come right up to Aunt Evy's room. She told me to bring you."

"I have been very much engaged, Ailsie, dear. Almost too busy to eat or sleep."

I did not blush at the equivocation, for I recalled the neglected meals and sleepless midnights of the past week.

"You shouldn't work so hard. It isn't wholesome!" chided my monitress, clinging to my hand all the way up stairs. "Here he is, Aunt Evy! He has been studying himself to death again. He'll have softening-on-the-brain, if he isn't careful."

Aunt Evy's pale face was lighted up by a smile that was motherly in its goodness. Her hand-clasp bespoke undiminished regard. I began to blame myself in earnest that even an all-engrossing love had beguiled me into passing forgetfulness of what I owed to her.

Ailsie kept close to me, as if fearful of losing me again. The easiest arm-chair was drawn up for me to Aunt Evy's side, and the small lady accepted her place upon my knee, sighing thankfully in dropping her head to my shoulder. Now and then, while I talked with her aunt, I felt her frame heave with the long sob I had remarked in my welcome—almost soundless, but deep-drawn and slow—the ground-swell of spent excitement. At the fourth repetition I tightened my arm about her and pressed my lips silently to her cheek. Both arms went around my neck, her face

was hidden for a second upon my breast; then she released herself from my embrace and rushed from the room.

"I must bespeak your forbearance for her," said Aunt Evy, her smile more troubled than I could understand. "She is not quite mistress of herself to-night. You forgot to take leave of her the last time you were here. She would not listen when I remarked upon and tried to explain the omission. 'It's all right!' she said, proudly; '*course* he didn't mean anything! You needn't tell me that! I'm 'stonished at you, for noticing such a little thing, Aunt Evy! It's 'most as bad as backbiting!' and off she marched, her head as high as a duchess's. But she cried herself to sleep that night. Her mother found her sleeping when she looked in upon her before retiring, the tears on her face and a very wet pillow telling of the flood she had shed while awake. I have been made really uneasy by her solicitude concerning you, for some days past. She has been flighty, restless, without appetite, or ability to apply herself to any occupation or diversion. Each evening she has taken her stand at my window, there, and watched along the street by which you usually come, without saying whom she was expecting, or expressing in words her disappointment when you did not appear. To-night, she had just left her tower of observation when the bell rang, and with a cry of delight she darted down-stairs. She was always sensitive and idealistic, with, although a healthy child, a delicate nervous organization. But since the fearful storm, last summer, this delicacy has been yet more obvious. I dread lest some untoward

event may intensify it into disease. This world of changes and shocks is a troublous place for her—my bonny brown bird!"

"I am more sorry than I can tell you that I have been the cause of pain and disappointment to her," I said, earnestly. "Had I imagined that the extraordinary press—the unusual engagements—that have absorbed me of late, to the exclusion of so much that would have given me pleasure—"

I was getting into smoother water, yet Aunt Evy checked me:

"Not a breath of apology, please! This is one of your homes, Barry; come when and how you will, and your welcome is sure. We have no right, and certainly no disposition to be censorious or exacting. Least of all, will Ailsie hear one word of blame of her Bayard, or distrust his affection."

"Her Bayard." It was a grand and ennobling thing for a man to love as I loved Bessie. That I was capable of doing it was an indirect evidence of something grand and worthy in my nature. But the name of the spotless chevalier, *sans peur et sans reproche*, stung me with the smart of unmerited praise.

I felt and I said that I was not good enough to be Ailsie's hero. I said, furthermore, and felt it no less, that it was a compliment the mediæval knight himself might have coveted to hold so high a place in her pure and loyal heart. That it ought to make me better, more earnest in seeking that which

was true and noble, more prompt to repel what was bad. Saying it, my heart warmed into softness and my voice was not so firm as I would have had it. As to the shock of last summer, I was grieved to hear that it had left lasting traces, and loth to credit the possibility of enduring harm to a robust merry-hearted child of her age.

"And by that token, she is seven years old, this very day!" I interrupted myself to exclaim. "Can this be Christmas Eve?"

"My dear boy!" said Aunt Evy, much amused. "Where have your wits been moss-gathering, that you are so far behind the times? One would think you had been buried alive for the last ten days."

I colored, furiously; got up and turned my back to the light to conceal my confusion.

"Christmas Eve!" I repeated stupidly. "It is incredible! It has been a long time since we made any account of Christmas at our house. We do have mince-pie and plum-pudding on the 25th of December, but that is about all that distinguishes it from other days. I knew the holidays were near, to be sure. As to there being no lectures to-morrow, it is Saturday, you know. I never thought of any other reason for the omission. What a dunce I am!"

"I verily believe you have been living in the clouds," rejoined Aunt Evy, still laughing. "Where were your eyes that you didn't see "CHRISTMAS" stamped in green-and-gold, all over the shop-windows?"

I was mute, my head hanging upon my chest like any

other detected school-boy. I had been a blind simpleton, dazed and daft by the survey of the glittering jewel of my own supreme happiness, and could not screw my courage up to confess to this gentlest of *confidantes* what was the glamour that had held eyes, ears and senses in bondage. Nothing else hurt me as did the knowledge that this was my little love's birthday, and that I had come to her empty-handed. Worst of all, I had not a penny with which to purchase birthday, or Christmas gift. My last five-dollar bill had gone for Bessie's ball-room bouquet. And holiday presents were so much to a child!

Aunt Evy divined my feelings to some extent.

"You are troubled because you have no keepsake for Alsie," she said reassuringly. "She expects nothing from you, having been bountifully remembered in her home, and to-morrow will bring a surfeit of gifts. If you can spare half-an-hour, during the day, for a walk with her, she will enjoy it more than bon-bons or jewelry. Now, call her back, and when she comes, take no notice of red or down-dropped eyes."

Ailsie was in her bed-room, said Robbie's nurse, whom I met in the hall, and I dispatched her in quest of the straying bird. She answered the summons without suspicious delay, carrying her head high, as was her way when there was need for self-control. I could imagine how she had looked when her aunt presumed to apologize for my forgetfulness of her, and she "marched off with the air of a duchess." She was pale, to-night, and my heart smote me remorsefully. I am

sure that then the thought was for the first time borne in upon me—"Shall I ever win love so fervent and entire, from another?"

Heaven knows the query was often enough with me in the days and years that followed.

I knelt to receive my queen, kissed her hands, one after the other, homage more real than simulated.

"I have been a thundering blockhead, Ailsie! You wouldn't believe it, but I never knew that this was Christmas Eve until Aunt Evy told me. There are no children in our house to keep Christmas for. So I never dreamed it was so near. If I had recollected Christmas Eve I couldn't have forgotten that it was your birthday."

I was on one knee in the middle of the room—the place and attitude in which Bessie had discovered me. It salves my wounded self-respect to reflect that the coincidence did not occur to me, at the moment. Ailsie laid her arm over my shoulder, leaving one hand in mine. Her beautiful eyes were brimming with pity.

"Forgot Christmas!" she said. "You never keep Christmas at your house? I did not know such a thing ever happened! I am afraid it is very wicked. I should have thought your prayers would have put you in mind. Why it is Our Saviour's birthday! Aren't you dreadfully unhappy about it?"

"I am, Ailsie! Fairly wretched!"

Her arm dropped from my neck. She drew away from me.

"I was not joking!"

The sad dignity of manner and tone rebuked me into true penitence.

"Don't be vexed!" I entreated. "I really feel very badly about my stupidity. And I shall believe that you think me a wicked fellow, past caring for, if you don't promise, before I rise from my knees, to take a long walk with me on the blessed Christmas Day. You shall show me how to keep it."

Pacified and delighted, she assented, and condescended to be lured back to her perch, which she occupied all the time I stayed, her bright, brown head now turned to one side, now to the other, hearkening, questioning, and replying with elfin grace and more than elfin wit. She did not offer to exhibit her birthday gifts—a tactful omission I comprehended and appreciated. I had brought her nothing, and she would not remind me that others had been more loving, or thoughtful of her happiness.

"So my little wife is seven years old!" I said, after awhile, fitting the rounded chin into my hollowed palm. "Such a great age, and such a great girl!"

She blushed and laughed.

"It pleases me to be getting so old, for there is some chance of my catching up with you. I wish there was such a thing as your standing still and waiting for me, but I *suppose* that's out of the question."

"I'll engage not to grow any taller. That will help a little, won't it? And if you wish it, I'll not tell people exactly what my age is, even now."

"I don't care what people say!" scornfully. "I used to, when I was young and foolish. I've got past all that. The trouble about your being so awfully old is that I'm afraid you'll get to thinking of me as a wee snip of a child, that don't know anything. Then you'll stop loving me. Or, if you do care for me, you may be ashamed of me when very clever persons are by. That would be very bad."

"It can never happen, Ailsie. *You* will be the cleverest person of my acquaintance when you are grown."

Cheered, but not sanguine, she paused to admit the hope, then continued: "I wish I could believe so! I do try to learn. But this is such a big world. It scares me to see how many books have been made, and they are all the time making more. I don't see where I am going to find time to study them all. You are very smart. Papa says you are real *talentable*. You will keep on getting wiser. And I am so *innorant!*"

She leaned back on my arm, with a sigh of prospective exhaustion.

"Don't be uneasy, Chippy!" said Aunt Evy. "You have plenty of time before you, and nobody dreams of reading all or half the books that are made. As to Mr. Barry, you'll pass him before you are seventeen. It will be his turn then to sigh over his ignorance. I'll see to it that you are wise enough for him—or any other man."

Ailsie held up her face, in form, for the seven kisses due in honor of the anniversary, when her bedtime arrived; and I imprinted them lovingly, reverently—one upon her fore-

head, one upon each of the lids folding in the marvellous eyes, one upon each cheek, and two upon her mouth.

"She grows handsomer every day," I said to her aunt, when we were left to ourselves. "Richer in all gifts, mental, spiritual, physical. GOD bless her!"

I was in earnest, yet my thoughts flew suddenly and far from her, as soon as I reached the street. Ten o'clock struck ere I had walked two blocks. I had not looked upon the features of my divinity for five hours. Five ages! I accused myself of *lêse majesté* that I had been moderately content out of her presence. She had not scrupled to declare this particular ball "a bore," and to profess her preference for a quiet home-evening.

"If *you* could drop in!" was the graceful addenda.

That her unlikeness to other girls was in nothing more manifest than in her noble frankness, was a postulate I never wearied of repeating to my already convinced self. I believed that she was a sacrifice to Society on this particular night. I could not enjoy a ball were she absent. Why should not the Robin Adair lament be chanted by her heart, the while I was nowhere visible to "make the assembly shine" for her optics?

I was so far left to myself as to hum air and words, and to be measurably consoled thereby.

"What's this dull town to me?
Robin's not here.
What's here I wish to see?
Robin Adair!

Where's all the joy and mirth
Made the town a heaven on earth! –
Oh! they've vanished all with thee,
Robin Adair."

A drunken fellow, out-at-elbows, stepping high and carefully along the level pavement, joined in the tune in a wheezing falsetto, laughing loudly as I broke off in disgust.

Street-sentimentalities have their inconveniences and incongruities. I was not, by nature, a puppy, nor had my home-life tended to foster the germs of self-conceit that are not wanting in the composition of most boys. Looking back dispassionately to this delirious period, I see that a man must needs have been the pink of humility had he been doubtful as to his standing in the affections of any sincere woman who had given him such encouragement as had fed my hopes. And be it remembered that Bessie's forte was candor. My experience of college "quizzing" might, indeed, have excited a suspicion that she was trailing me on for her amusement and my final discomfiture. Had her gracious words and telling glances been pure acting, I must have distrusted her at some period of our intimacy. With the memory of the catastrophe strong upon me, I yet affirm that her boasted sincerity was not deliberate hypocrisy. She really enjoyed my devotion. She could not exist without somebody's homage, and that somebody must be a man. I have seen other women, some of whom concealed it better and some worse than she, with whom the desire to fascinate and entangle every person of the other sex who

approached them, was innate and a greed. I have seen a cat play with a mouse when she was not hungry, precisely as if her design were to "tender" him for her dinner, and let him go, after all.

I had never said, "Will you marry me so soon as I shall provide the means for the transatlantic trip, and the erection of a neat brick house in a good neighborhood, with a wing for the home-office?"

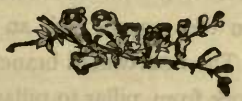
But we had talked openly of love in all its phrases, moods and tenses; of love's predicates, associate phrases and modifiers, and alluded so boldly to our mutual capacity for feeling and enjoying all these that I should have rated myself as the basest of triflers could I have admitted the remotest chance of my leaving the binding question unspoken at the last. It was much for me to feel on this Christmas Eve that one of life's great prizes was won; that my heart was moored for all time. No more hungering and thirsting for the share of love the kind Father must have ordained as my portion when He framed my capacity for happiness and for suffering through the affections. No more trivial and baseless speculations as to the shape in which my fate would appear.

Is passion in the early and violent stages invariably puerile?

"I am in the biggest glee I ever felt!" said a youth once, meeting me on the street. "My girl has just said 'Yes.' Hurrah for our side!" And he threw up his hat ten feet in the air, catching it as it came down.

I could have laughed, danced, sung in my "glee," while

revolving the above thoughts in my mind. If I did not shout, "Hurrah for my side!" I felt it. Was it moreover because I *was* a boy in years and experience that I was tormented by an incessant propensity to ascertain for myself that my treasure was a verity and safe, as an urchin takes out his new four-blader twenty times an hour, only to turn it over, pull out and polish and shut the blades and put it back into his pocket, to burn there into intolerableness in less than five minutes?



## CHAPTER XI.

### (FOOL'S) PARADISE LOST.

I COULD not have slept a wink that night without going ten blocks out of my way to see the outside of the house that would contain my Koh-i-noor until three o'clock in the morning.

I knew the street and the number, and the illuminated windows guided me directly to the hospitable mansion. It was spacious and built upon a corner, with a larger yard on two sides of it than most city houses can boast. On the cross-street was a long veranda, draped, in the season, with an almost impervious curtain of vines. The intertwined branches, bare of leaves, wove a stout network from pillar to pillar, through the interstices of which I espied forms passing between me and the French casements. The side street was in friendly obscurity, the iron railing of the yard low. The floor of the veranda was not six feet above the level of the ground. I put my hand on the fence, cleared it at a spring, and stood in friendlier shadow directly beneath the balcony, within arm's length of those walking upon it.

I had placed myself in a questionable situation with a very

faint hope of securing a questionable good. Bessie had informed me that there were three hundred invitations out for the ball. I had, thus, the three-hundredth part of a chance of beholding her waltzing in another man's arms, and of being driven to desperation by the odious spectacle. The casements were ajar, and there poured toward and over me the blended murmur of sweet girl-voices, and the deeper tones of their attendants, with soft bursts of well-bred laughter, and wafts of warm, perfumed air. The phantasmagoria inside the brilliant saloon was bewilderingly gay, streams of promenaders flowing down on one side, up the other, like a restless, elliptical rainbow. I looked too far and too eagerly at first. I discredited the evidence of my eyes, when, having accustomed themselves to the glare of light, they showed me, on the veranda, so near me I could hear the swish of her robe against the railing, her whom I sought.

The night was raw, although not very cold, and the dear imprudent creature wore no covering on her head beyond her wealth of chestnut hair and a semi-wreath of roses ; none upon her shoulders except their own fairness, which I do not think was pearl-powder. They gleamed in the gas-light like marble. The ivory curves of her arm were white as her dress. Her head was bowed to meet a bouquet she lifted to her face.

Which bouquet was not the one I had given her !

This was larger and composed of rarer exotics than was that for which my last " V " had gone. There was never a less mercenary lover than was I, at that epoch, but I calcu-

lated, with a sickening pang, that this collection of camellias, tea-roses, violets, etc., could not have cost less than four times the sum I had impoverished myself to expend—it would seem uselessly. The qualm yielded slightly to the hope that this might be a borrowed treasure. Young girls had a way of exchanging bouquets at parties, for an hour or so. It was not agreeable to reflect that careless fingers had toyed with that into whose heart I had breathed vows inaudible, but so hot they ought to have withered the frail blossoms on the spot, before transferring it to Queen Bess's keeping. But better thus, than to believe that it lay, slighted and forgotten, on her dressing-table, or had been stuck by her prudent maid into a pitcher or wash-hand basin.

A pink japonica, variegated with white—stemless, after the manner of florist's japonicas—was detached by her handling, and dropped, unseen by her or her escort, upon my arm. I caught it, pressed it to my lips, and believed that it was yet warm with her breath. The omen gave me strength to scan her companion. I was uncertain whether I ought to feel better or worse when I recognized the "Nat" who had paid a dutiful visit to his Aunt Barnes last Sabbath afternoon, and who should certainly have returned to Philadelphia and his own business five days since; the "Nat" whom Bessie was sorry to miss; whom she had loved dearly when they were at school together.

"Nat" was talking. He had a clear voice and rather an incisive articulation, and, upon the honor of a sad and sincere gentleman, this is what he was saying:

"Your college-boy is not here to-night? Couldn't you get him a ticket?"

A white shoulder was shrugged. The lovely face laughed up from the costly bouquet.

"A dozen for the asking! But where's the use of playing the hypocrite when there's nothing to be gained by it? The sweet youth would have been in my way—in his own, and, most of all, in yours. *You* ought not to regret his absence."

"Have I hinted that I do? Not that it would have made much difference to me. I don't let cubs interfere seriously with my personal arrangements. Why do you have him hanging around you, all the time he is out of school?"

"You would prefer for me to wear the willow while your Highness is flirting with the pretty quakeresses? You may be thankful that your present substitute is not more dangerous. He is innocent as a poodle, and infinitely less troublesome."

"*Chacun à son gout!* I shouldn't have suspected you of a partiality for veal. But, as you say, I may thank my stars that it is no worse. There's our waltz! And you will take cold out here!"

He handed her through the window, and they were merged in the throng.

I might have another sight of them if I waited until the circling polka brought them past my post of observation and discovery. I did not stay.

As I vaulted over the fence to the side-walk, something

happened that would have mortified and annoyed me when I was ten minutes younger.

"That's a rum way of getting off a gentleman's premises!" said a gruff voice, simultaneously with the grip of a hand upon my arm. "Should call it taking liberties myself!"

I confronted the policeman, fiercely.

"I am no thief! I went there to see a friend!"

The word must have hung fire suspiciously, for he turned me ungently towards the nearest lamp-post.

"No objection to calling of him out, and proving identity, I 'spose? Might be a case of spoons, you see. One like it up town, last week. Night of a bang-out party in the house. You may be one of the gang, for all I know."

The conscientious fellow had no intention of being facetious, and I was too angrily miserable to see the undesigned *double entendre*, but the time came when I could laugh over the "case of spoons," as a random arrow that twanged straight home.

"I will prove my own identity!" I retorted. "Here is my card, and if you need to make sure that it *is* mine, you can follow me home."

The rascal held up the morsel of pasteboard to the street-lamp, keeping tight hold of my sleeve.

"'Barry M. Haye, No. — West 12th street!'" he spelled aloud.

"Off my beat! I'm detailed for this here neighborhood, to-night, to keep an eye on likely characters." By which he did not mean personable. "Here, Phipps!"

Another policeman crossed the street, and approached us. A knot of five or six people clustered about the trio, Policeman No. 1 retaining his clutch of my sleeve.

"You keep this here gent in sight," he ordered his fellow. "If he tries to bolt, spring your rattle and take him into custody immediate. Says he lives at — West 12. Here's his label!" passing over his card. "If there should be anything off the square round here to-morrow, it's as well to know where to find him. Move on spry!"

"If you touch me, I will kill you!" I said under my breath, to my custodian who made as if he would have taken my arm. "Follow me as close as you like."

He did not look like a doughty warrior, and changed countenance at the threat. He was not ill-natured, for he might have committed me for resistance to the law.

"Tut, tut!" he said, after a glance at my livid face. "I guess this is a mistake all 'round. I ain't one for interferin' with young gents' larks. You step on pretty lively, and I won't bother you."

I have a confused idea that one or more of the witnesses of the arrest followed us for some squares, but I cared nothing about it, then. When I took my key out at my father's door, there was no one in sight except policeman No. 2, strolling lazily up the other side of the way. He raised his finger to his cap *à la militaire* in resigning the charge of me, and I ought to have been thankful that I had got well out of an absurd scrape.

I was not in a frame of mind to cherish gratitude, or any

other Christian grace. The parlor door was ajar, and my sister was at the piano; she had a strong voice, was vain of it, and managed it effectively. While tearing off my overcoat in the hall, I had a partial view of the tableau at the instrument. A rich young popinjay, who was strenuously encouraged by step-parent and daughter, bent over the songstress and her eyes were elevated to meet his, as she warbled to a thrumping accompaniment—

"Am I not fondly thine own?
Yes! *yes!* YES! YES!!
Am I not fondly thine own!"

"As if a crescendo of affirmatives a mile long could convince a sane man of a woman's truth!" growled I, savagely, mounting to my third-story back, pursued by the staccato refrain that rose into a shriek of elvish laughter before I muffled it by slamming my door.

Not that I could keep it out. It was a new song, presented to my sister that evening by her suitor, and when she had sung it all through by herself three times, he joined an execrable base to the strident soprano. Between them they persecuted me to the topmost pitch of distraction. I turn cold and faint, to this hour, when the tortures of that night recur to me.

I had struck a light mechanically after closing the door, dropped into a chair, and buried my head in my hands. Being but a boy, I should have wept had the anguish been more tolerable. As it was, bereft of hope, and without

redress; bruised and shaken by the fall from bliss to perdition, I suffered as I had loved, unconscionably. There is a nerve ajar in my long-healed heart while I tell it. There was no well-meaning comforter near to bid me consider that, whereas I had lived in passable peace and happiness until within a fortnight without knowing her who had wrought for me such rapture and such woe, common sense and practical philosophy held out a fair prospect of a return to my normal condition when the paroxysm of disappointment should have passed; that it was opposed to reason and precedent that a passion but nine days old should make a total wreck of a human life. I would have pitched Eliphaz the Temanite down-stairs, and sent Bildad and Zophar to keep him company at the bottom, had they—their native officiousness still in force—taken advantage of the privilege accorded to ghosts on Christmas Eve, and presented themselves to me, prepared to take up the line of argumentative disputation.

I was mad, through and through. It was not enough that I had been deceived. I had been also duped. There is deception into which a man can fall without injury to wholesome self-esteem. A victim is not, of necessity, a simpleton. I had been this woman's puppet; made to grimace and posture and jabber at her whim, and it was her humane whim to fool me to the top of my bent, for her convenience and the diversion of her accepted lover. I tore at my hair with hands that would have strangled him, if I could have got at him. Every word of his insolent allusions to me was re-distilled—concentrated venom—by viewless devils into

my ears. I was a college boy, a cub, and a calf. She had only called me "a sweet youth," but that was worse than scathing ridicule, or opprobrious epithets. I ground my teeth together until I could hardly part the jaws, then set myself to work as methodically as I could, to recount the favors she had granted me. How, without shame, and, it now appeared systematically, she had fed the flame of the devotion I had not been able to conceal from the hour of our first meeting. Raw cub though I was, my demonstrations of the adoration in which my soul lay prostrate would have been moderate and decently conventional, if she had let me alone. If she had not made me drunk with flattery, and stolen away sense and prudence with every glance and word. With all my folly I was not a coxcomb, or I should have thought at some palpable exhibition of her partiality—"This girl is throwing herself at my head!" Whereas, in my frankest self-communings, I had only admitted that, with a lofty contempt for the trammels of etiquette and coquetry, she obeyed the movings of her generous heart and met me—so conscious of my ill-desert—half-way.

All the time she had been acting a farce—blaspheming the holy names of Love and Faith and Wedlock, and toying with my heart as I had seen her, one evening, toss an orange from one hand to the other, and finally let it roll away into a corner, with—"Don't pick it up! I am getting tired of oranges!" She was shrewd by nature and by practice. Love and beaux were an old story with her. I could not mislead myself, for the sake of poor human nature, into the

hope that she had imagined it was an even game—diamond cut diamond—with us. I had been honest and fatuous, and she knew it as well as that she had never cared the ninth part of a jot, nor the ninety-ninth part of a tittle for me.

All this time—whether I reasoned, or whether I raved—bursts of that diabolical ballad were pelting the panels of my door, linking themselves with a sort of idiotic sequence, into my frenzied reverie, sometimes compelling audible answers.

"Thou, thou *knowest* that I love thee!" insisted the soprano, until I was fain to cry out what a drivelling fool any man was who believed that he knew anything of the kind, while the base improvised a solo repetition of the already quadrupled affirmative, exasperating me into a "No! no! no!" that was nearly a yell.

They kept at it, and, in the midst of my agony, I *had* to hear it:

Piano prelude. First verse with refrain as a base solo, then as a duett.

Interlude.

Second verse, as above.

Interlude, No. 2.

And so on, beginning again, and going through the same process in an endless chain of distraction until the very chair in which I sat vibrated in time, to the "ting-a-ty! tang-e-ty!" of the accompaniment, and something in the back of my head, probably the rear-guard of the brain, beat like the measured thump of a big drum, with a stunning "Bang!" for the most capital "Yes!"

Ludicrous? Certainly—in the telling and in the hearing. In the endurance—misery, dire and prolonged.

About half-past eleven, the music ceased. Not so the echoes. They sounded and resounded through my vigil until I could scarcely tell which was imaginary, which actual distress. The night became colder. There was no fire in my room. When, at three o'clock, I tried to straighten myself up and make ready for bed, I thought for a moment that I was frozen, my limbs were so stiff and numb.

An old saying came to my mind, "Caught his death of cold."

I could not have done a wiser thing. Life was a more troublesome complaint than dissolution.

I pondered the significance of that word, also, rubbing my be-thumbed fingers into some degree of usefulness. It was not an elegant term, but it suited Life well. A "complaint!" That over which moan was made and plaint was chanted,—a complaint from the first cry to the latest groan.

"For which death is the only cure!" I muttered, turning out my gas, and tumbling into bed like a heathen, without a lisp, or thought of prayer—the "prayers" that might have "put me in mind" of other things besides whose birthday Christmas was.

Perhaps I could not have so much as repeated, "Now I lay me down to sleep," correctly, if I had tried. For the unceasing echoes were contending for the right to be fondly my own, in alternate base and soprano—in staccato accompaniment to every train of musing.

## CHAPTER XII.

### "THE NINE COLUMN."

THE first thing I heard at my awakening on Christmas morning—even despair cannot lie awake all night at one-and-twenty—was the vibrant tapping of hail against the windows.

I could not have been quite awake when I recognized what it was, for I whispered—"No walk with Ailsie, to-day!" before the scenes and horrors of last night laid hold of memory and soul.

Then I turned my face to the wall with a groan which was a curse upon light and recollection. I did not try to fall asleep again or so much as shut my eyes. Staring blankly at the white wall, and listening, with some appreciation of their congruity with my mood, to the monotonous patter upon the panes and the sough of the east wind between the sashes, I lay until the dressing-bell informed me that other people were up and hungry, and would carp and interrogate if I did not betake my appetiteless self to the breakfast-table, in thirty minutes.

But even my father was unpunctual this morning. It was

a legal holiday and stormy. Early rising in the circumstances was not a promising speculation.

I encountered my step-mother at the library door and said, "Good-morning," listlessly, to be answered tartly.

There was nothing negative about this excellent woman. One always "encountered" or ran afoul of her. Her speech was ever crisp and spicy, rather over-seasoned with salt. Indeed, her whole character gave one the impression of something that was a trifle too well corned. It had all the elements of durability and decided flavor, albeit somewhat hard and tough for daily food.

"I am glad somebody is down to breakfast!" she said, knotting the horizontal lines of her forehead, "I suppose Christmas is considered a valid excuse for laziness. It wasn't in my day!"

She swept on to the dining-room, like a gust of dryly bitter wind.

I was toasting my purpled hands at the library-grate, the only cheerful thing I had seen, that morning, when my sister bounced in.

"Isn't this the shabbiest thing! Good-morning, Sir Barry! I didn't see that you were here. I thought it was Aleck."

"Won't I do as well?" I aroused myself to say.

I was very lonely-hearted, longing, without knowing it, for the sympathy of a true woman. Madge, with her laughing blue eyes and red-gold hair and strawberry cheeks; who had never had a heart-ache in her life for a more dignified reason than the want of a new dress, or the untimely ruin of

a love of a hat; whose highest idea of sentiment was to sing "Am I not fondly thine own?" to Sam Murray in a handsomely-upholstered parlor—he in his best coat and she arrayed in the latest mode;—Madge, who protested that she hated boys, and treated me as one of the reviled wretches, —was yet my sister, who could recollect our own mother, and must once have loved and petted her baby-brother.

"It's nothing I want done! I'm only mad! I do despise meanness!"

She flung a book upon the table with emphasis that made it rebound and fall to the floor. I picked it up, examining the corners to see if they were broken.

"Lizzie Swayne sent it to me! For a Christmas present! We have always exchanged gifts since we were school-girls. A stupid, silly book of poetry! Think of it! Her brother is in the book-business, you see, and she got it at cost. I do detest anything that smells of the shop. I was such a ninny as to send her the sweetest mouchoir-case! blue satin and silver outside, with white quilted silk lining! I nearly put my eyes out working it. I wish I had kept it for myself!"

"This is a handsome book," I said, appeasingly, turning the leaves.

It was an illustrated copy of Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner." The etchings were spirited, the print and binding fine.

"A baby's story about a sailor's shooting a goose!" she retorted. "About fit for a child, five or six years old."

I was not set for the defence of Coleridge and his adult

admirers. Looking, instead, at the fly-leaf, I saw that it bore no inscription.

"Madge!" I proposed—"if you really do not care for the book, I will take it off your hands, at the retail price—not the cost,"—we both laughed—"and pay you next week. I am impecunious, at present. I want a story-book for a little daughter of Mr. Darling. I forgot her yesterday, and was poor besides. She likes books—and poetry-books, better than toys. May I have it?"

"With all my heart! I say, Barry, you are a trump to take it on those terms. I suppose you can ascertain the price at any book-store."

I wrapped the volume up neatly, when our Christmas breakfast had been despatched, my card inside bearing a pencilled promise to call during the day, and left it in person at Mr. Darling's door, seeing no one except a servant.

I was at liberty, this duty done, to be miserable to my heart's content, and all the unhappier because no one asked if I were curst or blest on this holiday of Christendom.

The storm was continuous, but never violent. The streets were almost deserted, for it was a wet snow, varied by an occasional fall of rain, that packed it into a clogging mass. I wandered up-town, cross-town, down-town, keeping well away from the quarter in which the Barneses lived; hands in pockets, hat dragged down to my eyebrows, eyes sullenly averted from the face of friend or stranger—a gruesome figure for the season, but past caring by whom I was seen, or what construction was put upon my appearance.

There was no straining after effect, no sensational sentimentality, in my aimless roaming and rueful mien. My bruises were new, my wounds green and aching. In time to come I might solace myself with remembering that the world was wide. Now, I only felt that it was empty.

The snow held on, balling upon my boot-soles until my slouching gait became a stumble. My overcoat was white upon the shoulders and in the creases, the curling brim of my so-lately-caressed beaver overran with slush, and dripped now upon my nose, now down my neck. In this condition I found myself at three o'clock, two miles from home, sitting upon a pile of lumber under a rude awning, a sort of wharf-shed, looking down and out at the river. It was raining heavily, but not fast, a dogged pour that made deep indentations in the lead-colored water, washing the rotting piles. The mass of the shipping lay further down the river. A solitary sloop, with no living creature visible, or near it, except a dog, chained to a kennel upon deck, was tied to the pier, pitching slowly in the incoming tide.

Alexander Smith's was a new name in men's mouths at that date. I had taken the "Life Drama" from Aunt Evy's knee, a fortnight before, and read some pages aloud; talked with her of these lines, little foreseeing when and how I should next repeat them.

> "How beautiful the yesterday that stood
> Over me like a rainbow! I am alone.
> The Past is past. I see the future stretch,
> All dark and barren as a rainy sea."

*My* Future! *My* Life! This was what I looked upon. And a woman had done it. It was a vile piece of work. I ought to have been enraged at the cool atrocity with which it was executed, but I was not. That was for last night. After the fire, cold and kindleless cinders. After the eruption, scoriæ, fit but to be trodden under foot by the brave and happy. I should have stood excused at the bar of conscience and most men's opinions had I learned to hate Bessie Barnes, as mightily as I had loved her. I might at least, in decent consistency, have been angry and ashamed that I worshipped her still. I drew the japonica she had lost, from my bosom, faded and blackened like my hopes, and kissed it. In doing it, I thought of David, hunted like a partridge on the mountains, deaf to the oaths and reproaches of the wild outlaws of his body-guard, while he gazed upon the fragment of the royal robe in his fingers, shorn while the king slept. It was not Saul the slayer, that he remembered, but the father of Jonathan and Michal, the Lord's anointed, in whose sight the young harper had been proud to find favor.

I would return, by letter, the token of what I had seen and overheard. I was not so besotted as to dream of possible reconciliation. One little minute—a score of words—had made the Past to be past: removed me from her by the dark and barren distance of a rainy sea whose thither shore I could not—I should never behold. Where was she now? I was to have gone to her this afternoon—I looked at my watch—at this very hour. She had never said, "Not

at home" to me. I pictured her resting, and resting the eyes of those who looked on her, in the leaf-brown puffiness of the satin chair, arrayed in one of my favorite dresses, for she consulted my taste in these matters—eyes soft with retrospection, the fairest tableau of "Lady awaiting a Lover," that ever visited limner's fancy. I should have been a dog had I sought her to lie again at her feet and sun myself in her smile. I knew it, while mad with desire for a sight of her face, the touch of her hand.

I could not help the fever-thirst. I could, by sheer stress of will, refrain from going near her; resist the temptation to sacrifice my manliness. This I did, and I say that it was more than could have been expected from the struck boy in whose home "Christmas was made little account of."

"Wal now, I do declare! if 'tain't you!"

A hand encased in a woollen mitten was extended to me while its fellow slapped me on the back. Ezra Gaskin's lean face—one cheek distended by a quid of tobacco, his winter's beard running to seed over his chin and meeting, in a gingery shock, the velvet coat-collar, faded to the same hue by time and weather—peered into mine, the pale gums showing above the broken line of upper teeth in his grin of welcome.

"Who'd a thought it? On a Chris'mas Day, too! 'Sposed ye wer' a frolickin' home, or some place else. How air ye, ennyhow? Folks all well?"

Hardly waiting for the brief replies to these queries, he burst forth with another:

"What upon yearth brings yer deown here, this time o' day, and in sech weather?"

"I have been walking," said I, stiffly, "and strayed down town. I stopped here for a few minutes to keep out of the rain and to look at the water."

"Ain't much of a show to-day!" he chuckled, glancing over his shoulder at the dingy waste, pitted by the rain.

The tide was rolling in faster and the ugly sloop creaked at her cable with every plunge. Ezra winked at it.

"Come down on that! Load o' truck, potatoes, cabbage and inguns, mostly. Gin'rally send 'em to teown by th' skipper, but I run down yesterday to pick up a tomb-stun for th' old lady—gran'ma, you mind? Can't set it into the ground 'tell the frost's out of course, but me an' ma, we kinder guessed the ar*tick*le could be had cheaper in winter when, for that reason, bis'ness must be slack in monerments. We jest hit the nail 'pon the head. I happened to run acrost a ra'al neat item—white marble, all carved but the name 'n' date. Even 'In Mem'ry of'— 'n' 'Sister, thou was mild 'n' lovely,' cut in handsome with plenty of room for eteceterers. I struck a bargain with the fellow on th' spot. Wanted him to take part pay in sass, but he'd no call for nothin' of the kind, he said, bein' a bachelor an' a single man. Wall! he filled in th' blanks to order, and we divided the cartage deown to th' sloop, and she come aboard las' night and was stowed away under cover, snug as could be, afore dark. Be still, you brute!" shying a muddy stone at the dog who had raised a howl.

"He's hungry, I guess. Skipper's been off all day, an' left him for to keep house. I got my dinner up-town at my brother's, and been a-knockin' 'round a considerable sence. Ef I'd a'knowed jest where to find you, I'd a' looked in upon ye. *Neow!* what d'ye say to goin' aboard of her fur a smoke, and I *would* like to have yer opinion of the old lady's stun. Jest fur old acquaintance sake. She allers kinder tuk to you, when you was so peakin' and off yer feed. Thought mebbe you'd enj'y takin' a squint at her head-stun."

The dog held up his head until his nose pointed the zenith, and emitted another shrill howl.

I began to beat the snow from my coat, and shook my hat, preparatory to a renewal of my promenade.

"Excuse me!" I said, coldly. "I ought to have been at home an hour ago. I have had no dinner yet. My respects to Mrs. Gaskin."

"It's rainin', an' you've never a sign of an umbereller!" objected Ezra, staying me with the worsted mitten. "I say! what ails ye? You ain't a bit nat'ral, to-day, neither in words, nor in looks. Don't seem to know 'nough to go in when it rains."

He leered so impudently that I could have slapped his lean cheeks, with a good will. I felt the color rush to mine.

"What do you mean!" I demanded.

Instead of replying, he laughed, yet more impudently.

"Better git home straight's you kin and stay there, Mr. Haye. Young men will be young men, the best on 'em.

But you've been a-goin' it a *leettle* to hard, I mistrust. Good-by! No offence, I hope! O Lor'!"

I was out of hearing of his snickering, by this, but as I turned the corner I heard the dog repeat his starved howl, and the meaner animal command him to "hold that racket!"

I had no definite purpose of keeping my engagement with Ailsie. I was not conscious of recollecting it, but something—perhaps a single fibre of the fast-untwisting thread of conscience—drew me to the street in which the Darlings lived. So disconnected were volition and motion that I was actually passing the house when a rapping on the panes drew my eyes upward to the window behind which I saw Ailsie smiling and beckoning.

The next instant she was standing in the open door, her face one glad glow.

"I am not fit to come into any civilized being's house!" I remonstrated, when she would have pulled me in. "I am as wet as a drowned squirrel."

"The more reason why you ought to come in and get dry!" she coaxed. "Now, *do!* I have the beautifullest fire ever made in the parlor, and I've been playing lady there all by myself, ever so long. Reading at the window. And watching for you. I expected you, if it *did* storm. You always keep your promises."

She had me inside of the door and shut it; then, without releasing her hold upon my wet, ungloved hand, gently drew me into the front parlor.

It was warm with red fire-light, and fragrant with Christ-

mas evergreens and bouquets. There was that air of happy peacefulness over all that folds instantly and sweetly about the consciousness of him who enters, from the outer world, a room which, untenanted, at present, bears throughout, evidences of recent and luxurious occupancy. The Spirit of Home, restful and smiling, brooded over the ruddy hearth. The breath of her presence, the shine of her furled wings, warned off chill and gloom.

Every chamber of the Darling house was a living-room, and it was in pleasant keeping with the family habits to see Ailsie curl herself up in a capacious Turkish chair, after she had divested me of my wet overcoat and rubbers, and settled me in as comfortable a seat the other side of the fire.

"This is what I call *heavenly!*" she said, drawing out each syllable luxuriously. "It is what I have been wishing for all the afternoon. I made the prettiest picture of it in my head. You see, Aunt Evy overtired herself yesterday and this morning, and has one of her detestable headaches. Nothing does them any good but to go to bed and be per-*fect*ly quiet. Papa and mamma have gone to a Christmas dinner at Uncle George's. Robby and baby are having a great time in the nursery with what Robby calls his 'play-toys,' and I could amuse myself as I liked. The book you sent me was per-fec-tion! I have read it three times already, and I was learning it by heart when I 'spied you. 'Course I wasn't sup-pe-rised to see you. But your being here was all the picture wanted. Listen to the rain, and the snow melting off the top of the windows and porch! It plays a real

tune. I could sing it—'pit-a-*pat*! tip-a-tap-*tap*! pit, pit, *pat!*' Isn't it odd it should keep such good time? Oh!" a long inspiration. "There's nothing so jolly as a stormy day in the house, with a nice book and your very own-est friend all to yourself, and nobody bothering 'round!"

I was very tired, I began to discover, leg-weary and empty. The chair was luxurious; the genial heat of the red grate made its way gradually through my benumbed frame. It was comforting, too, to know that Ailsie was made glad by my coming. She was nothing but a child, but I had been beggared in love since I kissed her at last night's parting. Something like the warmth of life stole to my heart with her cheery, loving tones.

"*You* are the dearest little friend in the world!" I said, gratefully. "It does me good to be with you."

She slipped to the floor and came to my side, drawn irresistibly by love-words. I put my arm about the small creature, as she stood by me, and laid my head on her shoulder.

"It does me good to be with you, Ailsie!" I repeated. "There are so few who care for me. And to-day, I have been *very* unhappy!"

"On Christmas! I am sorry!"

The dear hands held my head in fond enclasp; stroked my hair back from my temples. A cheek, soft as velvet, pressed close to mine. But she said never a word more. Her fine tact would not suffer her to question me, and she was too wise to risk unmeaning phrases of consolation.

The short winter day was dying. The straight rush of the

draught over the fire-tipped coals, the droning song of the wind in the chimney-throat, the tattoo of the drip outside the window, were all we heard for a time. My little love stayed by me, resolute, patient, dumb, looking—I could feel—at the fire, thinking of and sad for me, with the selfless compassion that belongs to woman—and angelhood. She would have stood thus for an hour, telling of this and much more by mute caressing, had I been so unkind as to permit it.

"I am spoiling your Christmas, and making a sorry instead of a pretty picture for you to remember," I ended the silence by saying. "Sit upon my knee, and we will talk of pleasanter things."

She obeyed so far as the change of position went. Her face did not relax from its gravity. The large, tender look in her eyes bespoke a travail of sympathy I could not bear to see when I was the cause of her pain.

"Never mind me!" she said, brusquely. "Pleasant talk isn't always the most interesting. And 'tisn't easy to make-believe you are happy when you have the heart-ache."

"The heart-ache!" I echoed, smiling. "What do you know of that, little Ailsie?"

"Because I am little Ailsie, you believe I don't understand. But we children know more than grown folks think. And we have our troubles. There's the multiplication table now! When I've said my prayers at night, and laid down to try to sleep, and I recollect that I've got to say the nine column in the morning—even to Aunt Evy—I wish I could

die before I wake. I do, truly! GOD understands. That's one comfort!"

She linked her small brown fingers together on her knee; her eyes saying unutterable things to the fire that grew redder and brighter with the thickening of the snow-shroud without the windows.

Was "that" a comfort to me? The question was a thrill, almost a shock. What did I know, or think, of the All-Knowing and All-Loving? Had the wild passion that had consumed me during that fatal ten days wrought purification, or degradation, within me? Was I more, or less of a man, for studying Bessie Barnes's beauty when with her and dreaming of it when away? What part or lot had I in the sublime simplicity of this child, who had suffered, as she loved, with all her little might; who in the dreads at which I could not laugh, so genuine were they, rested her whole weight upon—"GOD understands!"

Ailsie was many removes from the approved type of pious childhood. From first to last, there was not a feature of the "goody" baby about her. She had her hates, and her aversions; her tempers and tantrums—all hearty and undisguised. Her very earnestness of feeling and range of thought added to the intensity of her untoward moods. But above and under foible and fault, were integrity that never swerved; faith hope, and love in the GOD and Father of all, that was almost sight.

I spoke out my musing.

"I wish I felt as you do, Ailsie! But I am a very wicked

boy, sometimes. At all times, I am afraid. I want what I wish for, whether it is good for me, or not. And my nine-column is such an ugly customer, I feel more like fighting, than praying, when I think of it."

"Praying is a capital thing when you can fix your mind on it," was the knowing rejoinder. "It helps one awfully! But, unless you mean every single word you say, you're apt to get to thinking about something else—generally silly things, and *that's* another bother! There's many a bother for us poor creatures, seems to me. It's easy to get rid of some. Some stick like the Spanish needles that used to run into my stockings and hang on my dress, last summer."

A ray of amusement pierced my melancholy. Was my slighted love "a bother that would stick?" A caprice seized me. I drew the withered japonica from my pocket.

"Ailsie! I want you to do me a favor. Take this—carefully, for it is precious—and lay it, just as carefully, on the hottest pile of coal—there!" pointing to the grate. "And ask no questions."

She eyed me inquiringly, the faded flower intently, as it lay upon her palm.

"If it is precious—" she began—checked herself and colored.

Without another word she laid the japonica gently in a little hollow where waves of white heat were quivering like live things.

I covered my eyes with my hand, until she said in a low, awed voice, "It is quite burnt up," then looked up to meet

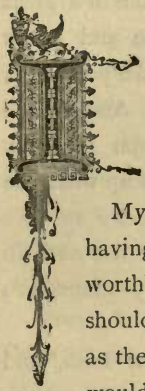
her pitying regards. She would not let them be puzzled by what I did not choose to explain.

"Thank you, dear!" I said, in lightness she seemed to see was feigned. "Some day, when you and I are married, Ailsie, I will tell you what that meant. By that time we will laugh at the whole affair."

"Not if you don't choose," she reiterated briefly. "Are you ready, quite ready, to think about something else? You are to take tea with me. Right here in the parlor! It's growing so dark, it must be time to see about getting it ready. Would you mind lighting the gas while I am gone? I won't be a minute."

## CHAPTER XIII.

### COMFORTED.



SAT by the fire in a reverie that had for its starting-point and centre the little pit of white flame, at the bottom of which was a pinch of gray ashes tossing in the heat-waves. My life had had its grand passion, then, which, having burned out, had emptied my heart of all save worthless residuum. When the days of my mourning should be accomplished, hope would lie as lifeless as the dust of the dead flower. My "nine-column" would be to take up the burden of life—a body without breath or beauty—and bear it to the welcome end. Welcome because it *was* the end. I was very unhappy, and general dolefulness had set in heavily. Physical inanition was an element that entered largely into my depression, but this I did not know. The suggestion would have mortified me had it been made. I was too faint of stomach—I thought of heart—to reason consecutively. To sit still, staring at the inch-wide crater of the topmost lump of ignited coal, and to be desperately wretched, was the limit of my capacity. I had done enough of this sort of business within the last twenty-four hours to understand the process.

I had the grace to feel abashed at Ailsie's exclamation—"Why, you are in the dark, still!" and to jump up to perform her forgotten behest, apologizing for my neglect by saying that "I liked the firelight."

"'Tisn't good to eat by," observed the little housekeeper, clearing books and papers from the centre-table in a great hurry. "Think of our having a tea-party—you and I—by our lone selves! Mamma left orders we should if you came, for I was certain you'd be in about tea-time. And Norah is in a grand humor, on account of her Christmas presents. You ought to have seen her fly around to get up what she called "a beautiful, nate tay—and wasn't it loocky we were to have it so airly, so's she could hurry on her hat and rin 'round the corner in sayson to attind Barney Finnegan's wake—rist his sowl!'"

Ailsie was innocently vain of her 'excellent Irish,' and not unfrequently aired it for my benefit. She was a born mimic as she was an elocutionist. Her tongue ran now as if the vocal apparatus were just wound up.

"I saved half of my birth-day cake for you. It was a beauty! All over icing and flowers, with seven weeny wax candles stuck in the top. There's one for every year, you know. But won't it have to be a "whopper" when I am fifty years old? Do you know that's the only trouble I have about your being so very much older than me? I won't be clever enough to get married before I'm twenty-one. By that time, you'll be—"

"Ailsie!" arresting my work of assisting her, the picture

of blank dismay. "You are not thinking of throwing me overboard, after all your promises!"

She set her head on one side, like a saucy sparrow, giving her face the comical upward twist she only could achieve.

"That's 'cording as you behave, Mr. Barry! If you stay away many more week-and-a-halfs, there's no telling what may happen."

This was the sole reproof she ever administered for my truancy. From no one else would she hear a whisper in reprobation of it. "The king can do no wrong," was the rule of word and action; although, until happy in my restored allegiance, she had not been able to discuss with any one beside her aunt the desertion she felt so acutely.

Norah had sustained her vaunt of the "beautiful tay," which she soon brought in upon a large tray and set down between us on the table. There were a tiny silver tea-pot of strong hot tea for me, with milk for Ailsie; bread and butter, thin slices of ruby tongue, doughnuts and cheese, birthday cake, calves'-foot jelly and cream. Such canine and unromantic hunger attacked me at sight of the display, that I forgot to be chagrined at the unlovely weakness until after the feast. Ailsie's self-felicitation in the Christmas banquet and my participation therein, was the prettiest thing imaginable. She could not maintain the state she at first attempted, as my hospitable *vis-à-vis*, but hovered about me with sugar-dish, cream-pitcher, and cake-basket, like a guardian sylph, pressing viands and sweets upon me with urgency I did not

resist until the craving appetite of a long young man, who had fasted all day, was gratified.

"It's *very* kind of you to eat so nicely!" prattled the unsuspecting hostess. "Some grown people make-believe at children's parties. It's nibble, nibble! and sip, and smack their lips over the leastest crumb and drop! Just to please us! As if we didn't see right through their humbuggering! But you take hold, like a gentleman, as you would at mamma's table."

"Because everything is so good, Ailsie, and I am really hungry," said I, honestly.

But I could not disabuse her mind of the belief that I had done much to oblige her in "taking hold."

The table was cleared, finally, the tray carried off by Norah, and books and papers rearranged with conscientious precision. Then Ailsie produced "Ye Ancient Mariner."

"If you wouldn't mind"—her favorite preface to a petition—"reading it over with me? There are some odd words I don't understand. And some of the verses I would like you to ex-plain."

The shutters were closed upon the storm. Norah had replenished the fire and swept up the hearth, before departing to her funereal festivity. I was comforted in body, and more equable in spirits than was natural or dignified in one who had so lately reduced the interests and joys of existence to a quarter-teaspoonful of ashes. My little love brought her chair up to mine, leaned confidingly against me while I read aloud. We stopped at each illustration and

passed our sentence upon design and execution. She asked and received explanations of such words as "eftsoons," "shrieve," and "ivy-tod;" but she listened, for the most part, in attention that had no audible language—scarcely breath.

When the last lines were read, her breast heaved in a painful respiration.

"Poor man! how he suffered! Yet he had done a wicked thing. I don't see how it could have happened. For you see"—turning back some leaves—"the albatross was

> 'The bird that *loved the man*
> Who shot him with his bow!'

I should think he could as soon have killed a little baby he was in the habit of playing with. But he was punished *fearfully*. That is what 'penance' means, isn't it? It makes your flesh crawl to think of his carrying that dead bird hanging around his neck."

She turned other leaves, meditatively.

"There are some of the *loveliest* verses in here! Isn't that just like being in the woods—*our* woods—in summer-time? Or out on grandpa's piazza in the moonlight, listening to the waterfall at the bottom of the lawn?"

I read the lines designated by her finger:

> "A noise like of a hidden brook,
> In the leafy month of June,
> That to the sleeping woods, all night,
> Singeth a quiet tune."

"And there's that about the little birds"—she went on rapidly—"that

—'seemed to fill the sea and air
With their sweet jargoning.'

"I shall always think of it when the birds wake me in the morning in the country. I shall never, never—not if I live to be a million—be able to say such beautiful things!"

Her voice faltered, and I was surprised to see her eyes fill with tears.

"Ailsie, pet!" I exclaimed. "What is it?"

For answer, she hid her face against my arm, and sobbed that she "didn't know. Pretty things that she saw and heard made her feel strange, sometimes. Not just as if she was sorry. But—but—oh, *couldn't* I understand?"

This last with a petulant dash of the drops from her lashes.

"Yes, dear," I answered. "I do comprehend. But, Ailsie! such feelings are a sure sign that you will be able to write and say beautiful things, some day. That is something to look forward to."

"It hurts *here!*" she continued, piteous, yet much consoled, laying her hand upon her heart—"and *here!*" clasping her throat. "I want to cry, and yet, all the while, I know I'm only glad."

I should have smiled at the thought of repeating to another child the words that arose to my lips at this *naïve* attempt to syllable soul-yearning, but, as she rested within my encircling arm, I said, slowly, and softly—

"I see the lights of the village
Gleam through the rain and the mist,
And a feeling of sadness comes o'er me
That my soul cannot resist.

"A feeling of sadness and longing
That is not akin to pain,
And resembles sorrow only
As the mists resemble the rain.

"That is something like what you mean, is it not?"

"Please say it again!"

I complied, and then she repeated it for herself, without a mistake.

"Thank you for telling it to me! I shall never forget it."

We chatted of other things, I leading the way. I was never easy when the ardent spirit so far outleaped her years. I believed then—and I have seen no cause since to change my mind—that as many precocious children live to become commonplace men and women, as die and leave in their stead in the places that once knew them, beauteous memories, fairer and dearer with every year that roots the sod upon their graves. But I felt, instinctively, that no common lot—made up of everyday joys and ordinary griefs—lay before her who, but yesterday, passed the boundary of infancy. Already, existence meant to her earnestness, perplexity, endeavor. Knowledge, sorrow, love, would be no holiday themes with her as girl and woman. Nature had set upon soul, heart, and face, the signet—"This child has

a Destiny, and she will be straitened until it be accomplished."

"Whom do you think I met down by the river, to-day, Alisie?" asked I. "Our old acquaintance, Mr. Gaskin. He had come to town to sell a load of potatoes."

Her lip curved contemptuously.

"I should think"—with withering emphasis—"that he was just the sort of man who would peddle potatoes about town on Christmas Day. Bah! And how is Mrs. 'Ezry?' Had he seen anybody from grandpa's, lately?"

"I did not inquire. He invited me to go with him on a sloop in which he had brought down his truck—'mostly potatoes, cabbage and inguns'—a raw 'biled dinner,' and enough to feast the city, but I declined. I dare say he would have let me stay to supper, if I had hinted hard enough.'

"It's a pity you missed the salt pork and cold potatoes. Uncle Wy says he is the most *penu-ri-ant* man he ever saw."

Ailsie dearly loved to handle polysyllables, as I have said. It was always diverting to me when a very stout one got the better of her.

"I'm glad he doesn't visit here," she continued. "I can't bear him. Nor ever could. He looks mean and bad to me, ever since the day he came down the bank and turned up his nose at the 'Bower.' 'If ye're hard up for work, better lend me a hand, hoein' potatoes!' said he. He ought to have been a potato himself. Then he would have been happy. *His* nose, indeed. As if it wasn't *curly* enough, already!"

I laughed.

Tennyson's "tip-tilted like the petal of a flower" was not a more apt description of his heroine's *retroussé* feature than was Ailsie's epithet of the twists and knobs in Ezra's proboscis. Encouraged by my laugh, she dealt him another tap.

"Somehow, he reminds me of the 'mother' I saw grandpa take out of a vinegar-barrel once—tough and sour and slimy. Faugh!"

I looked at my watch.

"It is time small people like you and myself were asleep," I said. "Before I go, won't you sing 'Kathleen O'More'—to get the taste of the 'mother' out of our mouths?"

When the ballad was finished, she mused for awhile.

"I have sung that so often I am quite acquainted with Kathleen," she said, dreamily. "I know exactly how she looks, sitting on the steps, 'to hear the wind blow and look at the moon.' There's a vine of some kind running over the door, and the wind blows the leaves of it. And her hair, too, for she has no hat on her head. Her pretty blue eyes are sad—I can't just make out why. Not quite sorry, but—

'As the mists resemble the rain.'

It's der-licious that you taught me *that!* It ex-plains so much. If I could draw, I would make a picture of her grave, with the robin red-breast hopping over it. There would be a holly tree all berries for Christmas, close by, and to-night the ground is covered with snow. Robins are not

afraid of snow. But it makes you feel lonesomely, to think how it is lying over real people. That is, of course, when we can't *make* ourselves believe that the soul isn't there. I *wish*, Mr. Barry" with pathetic depth of expression, "that I could precisely understand about people's souls. Now, this is *me!*"

She put out her plump brown hands, and felt the one and the other, as if to assure herself that this was true.

"I can see and feel that it is the same Me who thinks and talks. And, some day, just because the breath has gone out of it, my father and mother will be willing to put the very same Me into a hole in the ground and leave it out in the cold and dark and storm—all by itself. Instead of caring any more for the poor little body lying there with its eyes shut, as if waiting to be waked up, they'll be talking about 'Ailsie in heaven.' The soul-Ailsie they nor nobody else ever saw! There's no use saying anything to me about it! It's a riddle-me-ree all the way through. Just the comicalest thing ever was! I *sup*-pose if you were to study about nothing else all your life time, it might be plain by the day you came to die. I *sup*-pose, too, it's awful sinful—maybe blas-phe-mious—but I *don't* want to die, Mr. Barry! I went over it all to myself last Sunday when the other children in Sunday-school were singing that they 'wanted to be an angel, And with the angels stand, A crown upon their forehead, *And* a harp within their hand.' I didn't sing it because I didn't want to be any such thing. I can't help loving to live. It sounds ri-dic-e-lous, but I *love* my poor little body.

Even if it '*must* die, this mortal frame decay, and these active limbs of mine lie mouldering in the clay!' Ugh! That's the most des-gust-ingest hymn I know. The idea of *singing* such words!"

She had thought and talked herself into pale excitement. I raised her to my lap again and chafed her fingers, which were cold and tremulous.

"You should not torment your dear little self about such matters—especially so near bed-time," I said, soothingly. "It is all imagination, Ailsie. The soul is so much the better part of us that we can afford to let the other go, when we have no more use for it."

Her burst of hysterical laughter startled me. It was several minutes before she could speak articulately, and the tears she wiped away were of genuine mirth.

"That minds me—" she related still laughing, "of what happened when I was small. Mamma and I found the shell of a locust in grandpa's woods, one day, and she explained to me how he had split it down the back and crawled out, when his wings sprouted, and how that was the way the soul shook off the body. At least, that was what I thought she said. So, another day, Clarine was leaning so far out of the window, I was afraid she'd tumble, and I caught hold of her dress, and called to her—'Don't you know if you break your neck they'll take your skin off and make an angel of you?'

"It's really s'prising what silly things children can say. And they think a million sillier ones they daren't speak out

for fear grown people would laugh at them. That's the absurdest and meanest way any man or woman can have—laughing at a foolish, *innorant* hop-o-my-thumb of a child! They aren't so fond of being made fun of themselves, I'm sure."

I "s'prised" myself by smiling at this little anecdote as I ploughed my way home through the sodden snow, that, in spite of alternate rain-falls, was six inches on the level.

"The quaintest and dearest child that ever lived!" was my soliloquy on entering the dormitory which had been the scene of last night's agony. "Who would have believed that, after all, I should have had a tolerable Christmas evening?"

I fell obstinately to work, next morning. I would not dwell upon what had been. Still less should visions of Might-have-been interfere with the systematic hardening of my untempered heart. I fought—and conquered—the insane desire to walk within sight of the Barnes house, whenever I went abroad. I dug diligently into a ponderous work upon Anatomia, in preference to a newer and more interesting treatise upon Cardiac Affections, and to enforce my attention to the driest details of the subject, I made, each night, a copious abstract of the day's reading.

For recreation—or, more correctly speaking—relaxation, I went nearly every evening, "between the lights," to Mr. Darling's for a talk with Aunt Evy, and a frolic with Ailsie. Sometimes, I called earlier in the afternoon, and took the latter out walking. About once in three days I made a

professional diagnosis of my state, and always with encouraging results. I was on the highroad to permanent cure. A little tenderness still, under pressure: some febrile action at obtrusive gushes of memory: vertigo at inopportune seasons excited by trivial causes—the flutter of a dress around a corner; the sight of a pretty foot encased in a fashionable gaiter; the smell of certain flowers, and, one night, the accident of walking home from Mr. Darling's in a fog. I could have wished that these tests had been applied without effect. But it might have been much worse with me. There might have been need for the cautery and the moxa, whereas, mental tonics and moderate diversion were the milder measures indicated.

I had not been more sanguine of speedy recovery since receipt of the hurt, than upon one bright afternoon in mid-January, when Ailsie and I went nutting.

"Nutting!" cried Aunt Evy, dropping her knitting-work, "You absurd masculine! The squirrels and the rains have ruined all the nuts spared by human spoilers."

"Nevertheless, we go a nutting," I replied. "Ailsie! run for your overcoat and hat—I mean your hood and cloak!"

She was as bewildered as her aunt, but of this the leal little soul betrayed no symptom. Kissing her hand to me as she ran, she was off like the wind to make ready for the mysterious expedition. "Don't forget a basket!" I called after her. "A big one!"

"She would go with you blind-fold, to the world's end!"

said Aunt Evy. "No man ever had a more staunch champion. Your goodness to her is thoroughly appreciated, Barry. Not by her alone, but by us all. You are making her gloriously happy. She is growing on the sunny side of the wall."

"Don't say that I do *her* good!" I hastened to say. "She is my heart-missionary. I owe her more than I can tell you."

The thin white hand touched mine as it lay on the elbow of my chair. "That is well. She would ask no dearer mission. You have not been quite yourself for some weeks. You are less talkative, less blithe than in the early winter. I do not ask your confidence. If I can help you in any way you will not, I hope, defraud me of the pleasure—and the right. I am much older than you, but I have not forgotten that young blood is hot, and how short and easy is the downhill road—how thickly set with temptations to stray further from the safe way."

A delicate flush tinged her cheeks; she kept her eyes upon her work.

"I am passing rich, Barry, for a single woman whose wants are few. If money—or the lack of it—is the trouble, let me be your banker, and no one shall be the wiser."

"It is nothing of the kind!" I assured her, precipitately. "Nor do I drink or gamble—"

"Don't be lured by a wily spinster into confessions which you may repent," she interrupted. "It is quite possible that Ailsie may be your best teacher as she is your best comfort-

er. It must be a sore heart, indeed, which the soft hand of a little child presses to bruising. Don't be vexed when you think over what I have said, or accuse me of prying into your secrets. Remember that you are the adopted son of the household, my nephew-in-law that is to be, and forgive an auntie's freedom of speech."

"If I could—if I thought it wise to confide to anybody a trouble that is mine alone,—that never did, and never can affect another person living, I would seek no other comforter or adviser than yourself," was my reply. "But it is all over and done with, Aunt Evy. I have been an egregious fool—I could knock my brains out against your mantel there, when I recount the gradations of my monstrous folly to myself—and I am paying the piper, with no humor for more dancing. That is the story in brief. I have promised to tell Ailsie all about it on our wedding-day. Until then, I shall make it my business to recollect it as seldom as possible."

She gave back my smile, all the interest she was good enough to feel in me beaming in the pale, sweet face, that always reminded me of the words—"clear shining after rain," and there the subject rested.

Ailsie's preparations were swiftly made. She returned to us equipped in a navy-blue pelisse (I think that was the name of the trig over-dress, buttoned from the throat to the bottom of the skirt). A scarlet scarf was knotted about her neck, and a red-bird's wing gave piquancy to her velvet cap. Her cheeks were almost as bright as her feathers, and

she danced on tiptoe instead of walking, in the wildness of curiosity and the actual glee of present pleasure. The basket was not forgotten, and she resisted my offer to carry it, skipping away when I would have used gentle force to secure my end.

The air was sharp and dry, heightening the bloom and brightness of her face as she danced backward along the sidewalk, mischievous yet loving in the gleaming regards cast upon my soberer self.

"What a magnificent woman she will be!" thought I, and with the vision of womanhood recurred her words: "When I am grown, you will be 'most a hundred." She would be grown in twelve years at most. I should then be thirty-three. A man in his early prime. A bachelor, of course. The Spring of love falls not twice in the same life-time. I had heard of men—very foolish fellows I had thought them once, but judgment was crude with me in those days—who trained wives "to their hand" from infancy. What if our mock courtship and matrimonial compact were, in the very long run, to prove something more than badinage? I could take wiser care of my little love than any young blood who should be captivated by her handsome face and engaging ways, and declare himself (and more besides) after three weeks' acquaintanceship.

I shook the phantasm out of my brain, impatiently. I have been a believer since in the proverb touching the "heart caught in the rebound." I entertained myself, for the next rod or two, with investigating the apparent anomaly, and

decided that the average man, having got into the habit of loving, cannot summon strength to throw himself out of the rut. It is easier to run along—with lessening momentum, it may be, but in the same track—until "shunted" off at the first station or "turned out" when there happens to be a switch open.

Shakspeare told the story—as he did most of the tales over the spinning of which out of our own brains we toil benightedly—in the fable of the "little western flower," which "maidens call, Love-in-idleness:"

> "The herb I showed thee once.
> The juice of it on sleeping eyelids laid,
> Will make or man or woman madly dote
> Upon the next live creature that it sees."

Abstract speculation upon the theme that had so lately engrossed my every waking thought was the utmost license I granted imagination, under the disciplinary process to which I subjected errant fancy and rebellious heart.

"Are you displeased?" Ailsie stopped suddenly and ran back to me.

"My love! what a question! Nothing you do displeases me."

"You looked awfully glum!" slipping her hand into mine and keeping decorous step with my feet.

"I was thinking what a quiet old husband you will have when we are married, Ailsie."

"You will always be nice," she replied, confidently. "I don't take to boys. I believe I have an antip—what-do-you-

call-it ?—to them. It means what makes you keep out of their way. They are shocking rude. Some of them are vulga-ra-rians. 'Least, some in our street. New Year's Day they tied a tin pail to a dog's tail, and fastened a bag tight over a poor pussy's head, and let them run. It was abominationable. I don't see what the police were doing, that they weren't 'rested and locked up in jail. That's one good thing about a sure-enough man. He is above such tricks."

"I should hope so. But here is our first nut-grove."

Her eyes enlarged, then kindled into laughter, as we halted before a fruit-store. I pushed open the door and led her in.

There were dates, preserved in their own candied juices, packed in the matting bags in which they had journeyed over the desert; oranges, glowing more richly golden for the gray moss embedding them, or heaped in pyramids higher than our heads; apples that courted sight, taste, and smell; white grapes in kegs and hampers; Naples figs and guava jelly; and, on one side of the long counter, such wealth of nuts as made our basket seem small indeed.

"Not too many of one kind!" cautioned Ailsie, when I began my purchases. "Else there won't be room!"

I was shaking the basket hard to make space for some walnuts, and Ailsie had just asked indignantly, in answer to information I had furnished:

"What do they call them 'English walnuts' for, if they come from Persia?" when a musical ripple of laughter behind us changed my blood to ice.

"You mustn't believe everything in this world to be what

people call it, my dear!" said tones I knew by heart, even to the falling inflection of the sentence that was both coaxing and languid.

"How do you do, Mr. Haye?" continued the speaker. "I have not seen you in an age."

She offered her hand.

I lifted my hat, without the pretense of not seeing that she had designed a more friendly salutation. I had had a surfeit of shams.

She looked thunderstruck, blushed carnation, and with a confused murmur turned away and left the store.

"We can't get any more in!" regretted Ailsie, unobservant of the episode, pressing with all her weight upon the lid of the hamper. "When a thing is full, it is full. That's all there is about it. I'm afraid this top will give us trouble. The only way is to tie the top very tight with a strong string, when the basket is crammed full. If you don't—pop! off it comes, and there's a spill!"

Wise Ailsie! The shopman supplied a stout twine, and between us we secured the untoward cover.

"Now, we'll go home and tell Aunt Evy all about our nutting," said my companion, cheerily.

"All!" It was an inward groan. Was I likely to grieve the tender heart that had "adopted" me, by telling her that the world had turned upside down, reeled and shaken until I was sick with the unsteadiness, as the beautiful eyes dilated with astonishment, and were dimmed into piteousness under the stern gaze of mine? how that incoherent murmur stabbed

me like a stiletto, and blackness of darkness enveloped me with the hasty withdrawal of the woman I was learning not to love? But for Ailsie's interruption of the current of memory and thought, I think I should have pursued the fleeting figure and thrown myself upon the ground to supplicate pardon, so basely cruel did my reception of her advances appear to my conscience.

"We will go now," I said hoarsely, to my little companion.

She followed, instantly and mutely.

In the street, I raised my hat to let the wind reach the top of my head, on which a burning hand seemed to press with weight that numbed the brain.

"Are you sick?" queried Ailsie's tender voice. "We will go straight home—won't we?"

My better nature rallied, ashamed. That I had been knocked off my feet was no reason why her excursion should be spoiled. I made an effort at gayety that must have been ghastly.

"The nut-forest was a warm place," I said, affecting to heave a sigh of oppression. "Threshing down chestnuts is always tiresome. What say you to a saucer of ice-cream before we turn our faces homeward?"

What does any child say to ice-cream at any and all times? Ailsie looked her glad assent, and in three minutes we faced one another across a marble-topped table; an order for two creams, a charlotte russe, and assorted cakes was in the waiter's hands, and Ailsie's wide, gray eyes

were busy with the appointments and occupants of the saloon.

"I wish all these eating-places wouldn't smell as if dinner was just over, and the pots and kettles and plates hadn't been washed yet," she commented, with a sniff. "It's queer the air can't be sweet and clean for once. But this is a pretty room. Look at the angels on the ceiling. Looks as if they wouldn't mind coming down for a bite themselves. Hard on them, isn't it, to be pasted flat and fast when there's so many good things going on down here? Isn't that a dear little girl? Her hair is like silk-worms' silk. Aunt Evy has some. I've never fancied silk dresses since she told me the cocoons had to be baked or boiled before the silk was wound off. I can't help thinking when I see a particularly fat lady in a very fine silk dress, how funny she'd feel to be caught and roasted so's some monstracious giant might peel off her clothes to make frocks for his little girls' dolls. Guess she'd let silk-worms alone after that!"

Societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals were unknown at that date, but Ailsie was a whole corporation—Berg, Board, and Detectives, in herself. Her prattle did not amuse me now, but as it relieved me from the necessity of speech and showed that she was adequate to her own entertainment, it was welcome.

"It is a pity some people *will* look so much like animals!" she continued, benevolently compassionate. "That fat gentleman over there goes by our house every day. There's a picture in my Natural History of a seal that is just

him over again—mild, and sleepy, and puffy, and sleek. And that big man with white whiskers and hair standing every which way, is 'spressly like a papa lion. Its a *nactual* bother to me that a lady who sits across the aisle from us in church will remind me of a walrus—tusks and all. I keep peeping 'round in church-time to see if they are so very long and yellow. I *can't* help—try as I will. I *sup*-pose she can't help the tusks either. There is Miss Bessie Barnes! She is coming this way. I do hope she won't——"

She got no further.

A swish of silk skirts; a waft of violet perfume; the gleam of rings upon an ungloved hand on the back of an empty chair next to mine—and Bessie was saying:

"I saw you come in here, and followed you purposely. May I sit here for a minute until I have said what I have to say to you?"

I arose dumbly, drew back the chair that she might seat herself, and resumed mine.

"I am the open enemy of round-about measures," she began. "I am here to ask an explanation of your behavior of late, and to listen to your defence."

"Please be explicit!" I had to clear my throat to get out the three words, but I saw that she had helped me, in the outset, by assuming the aggressive.

"With pleasure; I always speak out my mind. You have never been near me since the noon of December 24th, nor given me any token of your existence. You were under an engagement to come to me the next day, and hear my

report of the ball. I feel very much disposed to tell you what explanation I had of your non-appearance. It may be the part of a friend to do it. And I am still your friend, little as you have deserved the title of mine. The report is all over town. It ought to be corrected, or smoothed down in some way. Fred says it is doing you harm. You won't be offended with me?"

"Because you repeat a popular rumor? That would be unjust, Miss Barnes."

Speech was becoming easier.

"Miss Barnes!" she echoed, in accents of pained surprise. "That *is* unjust—unkind—*Barry!*"

The word was scarcely louder than a whisper, but I clutched the edge of the marble slab hardly colder than my hand, to keep myself from visible trembling.

Failing any answer to her appeal, she took up the thread of her story.

"Papa was in somebody's office down-town, the other day, when six or eight gentlemen were discussing this odd tale, this 'popular rumor about you.' It was directly asserted that you had fallen into dissipated habits, that you were often seen intoxicated in the streets, and had been picked up, dead drunk, out of the gutter on the afternoon of Christmas Day, in one of the most disreputable quarters of the town, and taken to the station for the night. I tell you this because——"

"Oh! oh! oh!" Ailsie sprang to her feet on the other side of the narrow table, striking both clenched hands upon it.

Her face was absolutely livid with anger, her voice a shrill whisper, but as audible to us as if she had shrieked.

"That, is, the, very, worstest, story, anybody, ever, told!" slowly, with a blow of the fist on the marble for every comma. "Ever so many times wickeder than the one that horrid Mr. Gaskin told in papa's office, when your father and another man were there—*and nobody else!* No 'six or eight gentlemen' about it! And that was bad as could be. I wish he and his potatoes and cabbages and his mother's tomb-stone had gone to the bottom of the Red Sea along with Pharaoh's chariots before he had a chance to say such things. But *he* only declared that Mr. Barry was loafing about the docks on Christmas-Day, and had been drinking——"

"My child! wasn't that what I said?"

Thus Bessie, sweetly, eyeing the excited creature as she might a monkey.

"You said ever so much more! They thought I was asleep on the sofa in Aunt Evy's room, when papa was telling her and mamma about it. But Mr. Barry's name woke me, of course, and I jumped right up, and said it was a 'famous lie, from beginning to bottom, and how my dear Mr. Barry was with me, all the afternoon,—and wasn't I sitting on his knee, and close by him, for ever so many hours, and his breath wasn't a bit liquory? and wouldn't I have noticed it, the first thing, when I'm 'fraid to death of *tipsyers*? And how he read my 'Ancient Mari-ner-er,' all through and never missed a word, nor stuttered once, and

we had the soci*bel*est tea-party ever was, and he was so hungry and enjoyed two cups of tea, and we had a long talk afterward? and how nice and lovely he was?

"So papa said to mamma—'Ezra was mistaken, my dear. I would take Ailsie's word before his any day!'

"Because mine was the straight truth, you see. And we settled it, at home, that not a breath should be said to you, Mr. Barry, for fear of hurting your feelings—and here comes this wicked woman and *blabs!* I think you must be as bad as Jezebel and Ath-er-liah and that poisonous Cretia Borger I read about in a book. I'm shamed and 'stonished at you!"

Despite indignation and heart-ache, I had much ado to keep from smiling.

"Ailsie!" I said, gently, "you don't know what you are saying, dear! Sit down, quietly. You and I will settle all this when we get home. I thank you for believing in me and saying so. I need not take the pains, Miss Barnes, now that you have heard my *alibi* proved, to assure you that I did not spend Christmas-night in the station-house. As for your accusation that I have not been near you since noon on December 24th, it is as groundless as the charge of intoxication. I was so near you as you stood on the balcony of the ball-room between ten and eleven o'clock that night that a japonica fell from your bouquet into my hand. So near that I heard every word you said—you and your escort. You require no other 'defence,' I take it, of the cessation of my visits. Ailsie! there is your ice-cream. Eat it, and we will leave this unpleasant subject."

The poor child tried to obey. Her features were rigid, and her throat contracted with the first mouthful.

"I can't swallow!" she said. "Mayn't we please go home?"

Bessie laughed, as musically as if we had been flattering her all this while. There must have been some drops of game blood in her cool veins.

"Frankness between friends is always delightful. *Moi, je l'adore!*" she observed, rising, and drawing up the furs she had loosened in the warm room. "I could stay longer to enjoy it, but I perceive that I am interfering with your duties as nursery-governor. I hope you will succeed in coaxing the interesting infant to take her food. Shall I inquire if there is a pap-spoon in the establishment? *Au revoir!* I don't like *adieu*—ever. And we shall be glad to see you whenever professional engagements allow you to call. By-by, Ailsie, pet! Love to Aunt Evy!"

And thus my first love went out of my life.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### BLESSED ST. VALENTINE.

MY OWN DEAR MR. BARRY:

"On the 13th of February, we—Lou and I—(Lou is my cousin, Uncle Richard's daughter, and is staying with me)—Lou and I sent off a good many valentines. That night we went to bed a little excited, for the next morning we were to sing the charm, and who could tell what might happen? But once asleep, I slumbered late. When I did awake, Lou, who is an early bird, was almost dressed. After I was ready, we opened the window, cold as it was—and sang—

> 'Blessed St. Valentine! now while I look,
> Open the page of the Future's sealed book;
> Blessed St. Valentine! show unto me
> He who in future my true love shall be!'

"And whom do you suppose we saw? It was just sunrise, and the snow was all pink, and not a soul was in the street but one old shabby man—the forlornest spectacle! Next came an old woman scratching in the ash-barrels for bits of coal. We shut the window, and agreed that that charm

went for nothing. The postman was late that morning. He always is when other people are in a hurry. After watching a long time for him we had to go to our lessons, without a single valentine. After lessons we ran out to play. Nellie Brant was on her stoop, and we invited her to coast with us in our back-yard. We coasted awhile, and it was twelve o'clock when the postman appeared with just one, single, lonely, none-too-pretty valentine for Lou. Coasting was better fun than that, and back to it we went. Mamie Brant, Nellie's little sister, liked it so much that, when her dinner was ready, she wouldn't go in to it, and the nurse had to come out and carry her in. She yelled like a young wild Indian, all the way. After our dinner mamma took all us children out in the sleigh. We had a jolly ride and almost forgot our disappointment about the tiresome valentines that wouldn't come. When we got home we were quite surprised to find some waiting for us. If you had been in America I would not have had to wait so long. Two more came after supper, one for Lou, one for me. It was not difficult to get the door-bell answered that day. Sometimes it was a visitor for mamma, sometimes it was a beggar, sometimes only a man to ask where Mr. Somebody Else lived. But we all three—for Robby was as full of it as we were—ran into the front hall at once, which wasn't according to *Etiquet.* After supper, the bell kept up a continual jingle. Once, Mary went to the door and saw what she supposed was a valentine lying on the stoop, and as she stooped to pick it up, she heard some one snicker around the corner. She did not feel

very amiable when she found out what it was. Some one had chalked a little square, just the shape of a letter, on the floor!

"By-and-by the bell rang, and behold but a small dog, with cut ears and a stumpy tail who walked into the hall, looked around him very gravely, and then walked out again.

"This finished the list of our valentines.

"Do you keep Valentine's Day in Paris?

"I do want to see you *horribly!*

"Your dear little AILSIE."

It had come all the way across the salt ocean—this sheet of Bath post, filled in every corner with the childish characters that already began to take the stamp of the writer's strong individuality—had travelled a thousand leagues to tell me about St. Valentine's Day.

Only that! And having said her say, my little love had rested from her labors of the pen that must have cramped the small fingers sadly by the time the bottom of the fourth page was gained. I read the letter through again with a smile that was loving and longing. Ailsie's eyes looked up at me in every sentence—grave, direct, honest, and tender. Not a line of conventional compliment or apology broke the current of the narrative save where her faithful love for my too-unworthy self came to the surface in the simple—"If you had been in America, I should not have had to wait so long!" and the concluding paragraph of the epistle signed by my "dear little Ailsie." She never questioned it. At the antipodes, I must still have thought of and loved her

because she was Ailsie, and I, her "own dear Mr. Barry." She wrote to me every month, and my replies were as regular. Whatever interested her could not be dull to me in the heart of Paris, dividing my time between the lecture-room and the wards of a hospital.

I had been abroad six months. I was to stay but a year in all—so my stepmother and father had decided. I was working very hard, my spirits none the better for the attempt to crowd the work of three terms into one. I had a quarterly bulletin and remittance from home. About as often, Madge, who was making up her trousseau, entrusted me with an order for laces. Other correspondents in my native land I had none, always excepting Aunt Evy and Ailsie. I had had letters from both on the windy March night when I sat in my ten-by-ten apartment *au quinzième*—before a handful of charcoal in the tiny grate, and pictured to myself the home-comfort of the "Innermost" chamber, where the invalid was, perchance, reading one of the lovely books that seemed to gravitate to her by a natural law of affinities, or thinking her own lovelier thoughts, with closed lids, folded hands, and peacefully smiling lips, as I had seen her a hundred times while I talked with other members of the family. Where Ailsie might, at this very moment, be writing another letter to me. A serious matter she made of the manipulation, I knew from Aunt Evy's descriptions of her when thus engaged.

"Her wrestles with the spelling, and what she anathematizes as the 'nonsensible capital letters,' are heart-rend-

ing to behold," said the letter that accompanied my valentine. "The brain-work is a delight. She confided to me the other day her intention to 'write stories—beautiful ones—and bushels of poetry' when she should be a woman.

"'My head is full of them,' she added. 'I can't sleep, at night, for them, sometimes—I am so afraid I may forget the best of them before I can write them down.'

"'Why not put them upon paper, now?' I asked, somewhat curious to see of what complexion these beauties might be.

"The dear little thing blushed suddenly—(you remember the trick!) and fumbled with the corner of her apron, eyes downcast. Her lip curled like a baby's with the confession —'Because, Aunt Evy, they're not *spelled*.'

"The blessed infant! But there is a moral and a comfort in the incident for us 'grown-upper children,' as she used to name you and me when we were merry together. These half-fledged hopes and delicate fancies, and always restless, but, as yet, not-to-be-defined yearnings of yours and mine, Barry, what are they but the unspelled stories we shall as certainly grow into and become a part of in that Other Life, as our innocent pet will learn to write out her 'beautiful things?'

"I do not say, *apropos de bottes*, nor *apropos* to anything I have been thinking of, but because it comes into my head just here—that Bessie Barnes was married, last week, to Mr. Campion, of Philadelphia. It is an engagement of long standing, say her friends. It is not for acquaintances to

contradict it. But pretty Bessie had her swing of admiration not to hint at flirtations, more or less serious, during the alleged term of betrothment. You were very reticent touching the scene between you, Miss Barnes, and Ailsie, in the ice-cream saloon, more than a year ago, and Ailsie was dumb as the tomb, so I said nothing at the time of Bessie's visit to me, a few days later, and what she styled her 'confession.' She 'admitted that she might have given Mr. Haye cause to misconstrue her sisterly interest in one so interesting as himself; regretted the accidental misapprehension that had cost her your friendship, and especially that you had so far mistaken (a bevy of 'misses' you see!) her well-meant efforts to clear your reputation by possessing herself of the facts with regard to your misconduct on Christmas Day, as to lose (or mislay?) your temper in discussing the circumstance, and to incite Ailsie to violent language.'

"She made the explanation to me, presuming that I had had your version—and Ailsie's—of the interview. I convinced her of her error, and she begged that the matter might drop, 'unless a favorable opportunity should present itself to right her in your esteem. It was exquisitely painful,' etc., etc.

"Having freed my mind to the extent of the above statement, we will follow Mrs. Campion's example and drop the matter. She dropped hearts with less compunction than she did japonicas. You deserve a better wife—a truer, worthier, deeper-hearted woman—than she would have been

to you or any man. In the Father's own good time—and all his times are good—He will give her to you.

"Ailsie would deem this prophecy high treason, but she will have forgotten your claims in dreams of the coming Prince, by then."

It was inevitable that this letter should set me to thinking. It may have been the droning, like that of a sinking top, of the March wind at my high casement, or the blink of the dull, red eye in the grate, which seemed, all the while, on the point of shutting up entirely, that overcast my reverie with a shade of melancholy.

I did not grieve—I did not care—that Bessie was married. Having seen her mask down once, her power over me was destined to die speedily, and, on the whole, easily. Nor was I sorry that, measuring myself to-night with the love-maddened boy of fourteen months agone, I saw, as I had never seen before, how I had grown away from those days. But in awakening from that dream of a week, I had parted with something that was not Bessie, nor the hope of winning her for my own. I grudged the loss of the possibility of ever trusting again, as I had confided the hopes of time and eternity to one who toyed with hearts as with bubbles whose end is to be broken and not lamented. I could have laid my head in my hands and wept for the woman who had never lived;—the Ideal that had, in truth, so little in common with the comely, well-fed creature who had sat at her ease, on the leaf-brown satin throne during the December evenings which separated boyhood from manhood, that nothing but the

haste and hot blood of youth could palliate the blunder I had made.

I was lonely and low-spirited. Still too young to love work for work's sake, and, as I know now, singularly free from the vicious proclivities and the indulgences in which the majority of my fellows, of whatever nationality, regarded as pardonable if not legitimate relaxation from severe study, I was, out of class and hospital, as solitary as if Paris had been a desert. It was no light sin to rob a single-hearted, dreamy boy of an imagination that had typified so much—how much, I could only judge from the void it had left.

"Heaven forgive her," I said aloud. And "Thank Heaven for *one* true-hearted woman and the leal little friend who 'misses me horribly.' Lily and Snowdrop! The bosom that wears them should be pure!"

I raised the letters to lips that had known few kisses of mother or sister. Both were answered before I addressed myself to toil that wore far into the morning hours.

When I slept, my dreams were of aunt and niece—not once of Mrs. Campion—*née* Barnes.

## CHAPTER XV.

### HOME.

Y Blessed Mr. Barry :

"I promised, in my last, to give you a full description of the summer home papa has bought for us. We have been here three months. It is quite in the mountains, although but three miles from grandpa's. Mamma named it Brightwood, because the sun seems to shine brighter here than anywhere else. The lawn is a peninsula, and it is about a hundred yards from the house to the lake on three sides. There are dogs and pigs and cows and sheep and rabbits, and no end of chickens and ducks.

"Sometimes the ducks get drowned, which strikes me as extremely remarkable.

"I never liked a house more than I do this. It is three stories high, with an eddition on one side. In this are the kitchen, laundry, and wood-house. I have a room of my own in the third-story, with a balcony, where, on hot nights, I lay my pillows to cool, and, like our Kathleen, 'look at the moon,' and the stars, and have the deliciousest thinking-times, all to myself. A piazza runs on two sides of the

house and there is a porch at the back. Behind it are the woods, the carriage-road winding through them.

"The poultry-yard is the greatest novelty. So Robby thinks, for he is there half the day, with his apron full of corn. The barn is the most splendid place to play 'tit-tat' in. We burrow tunnels through the hay, and come out, at the other end, all covered with straw and dust. There are enough crooked trees on the lawn to set up a curiosity-shop.

"By the way, Aunt Evy and I have just finished that book. Dear little Nell's death is the heart-achingest thing I ever read.

"One tree is just like a horse. Mamma gave me an old skirt of hers for a riding habit, and I mount, whip in hand, and play horse-back. I like to climb upon the roof of the pig-pen, only the pigs run out when they hear me, and stand up on their hind legs and try to rub me with their noses. Pigs are amusing, but not clean enough for playmates.

"Robby and I are fond of making toad-stool pudding, but we never 'taste our wares.' It is so funny to see the bull-frogs in the water!

"It is very different from town, here, in the afternoons. Instead of playing in the dusty streets, dressed up in our next-to-best clothes, or staying in-doors until sundown when there's no chance for fun, we go up to the woods directly after breakfast and dinner and make fortresses and have picnics and play tales—mostly fairy stories, or sit about on the rocks in the cool shade and read.

"One day papa and my cousin Rick took Robby and me

to help gather wild cherries. And this is how we helped. They climbed the tree, and Robby and I stayed underneath and ate the cherries fast as they fell. We were so stained up when we got home that we could not get our faces and hands clean that day, and the stains have not come out of my dress and apron to *this* day. But what else could you expect?

"Papa and I take glorious walks. Sometimes up in the mountains and down into Pine Hollow, where it is dark as a pocket. Now that the Fall has come the leaves have changed. Red, yellow, brown, gray, purple—every color but black and blue—almost. The maple woods look as if they were afire. Some nights the winds whistle around the house, and the rain not only lulls the little children to sleep, but brings down the chestnuts and butternuts, and hickory-nuts. And don't we have to get up early in the morning to gather them before the greedy squirrels get their share and ours too?

"We eat our nuts sometimes before they are dry, and get sore mouths by it, which ought to teach us better next time, but doesn't.

"I have a flower-bed. So has Robby. Take it altogether, Brightwood is heaven on earth.

"I wish you were here. That is all I lack to make me supremely happy.

"Your dear little AILSIE."

Around this letter was wrapped a half-sheet of paper on which Aunt Evy had written:

"I have just heard that you are expected home by the

next steamer. Therefore, instead of sending the enclosed to your foreign address, I shall direct it to your father's care. We do not think it best to let Ailsie know that you may be so near lest her impatience should outrun your convenience. You know how warm will be your welcome from us all, come when you may. But we must not forget that others have claims which they will not be disposed to forego after so long a separation. Do not forget, however, that our home, in town or country, must ever be yours for the seeking.

Aff'y, E. L. MARR."

The claims of home and kindred! I smiled bitterly in reading of them.

Madge and her husband had dined at our father's on the day of my return. My step-mother had provided a bountiful and well-cooked repast. We were not a sentimental family, and the talk at table rambled from sea-sickness, foreign hotels, and the comparative merits of various ocean steamers, to American politics and the state of the stock-market. Nobody thought to drink my health at dessert. My step-mother barely tolerated the introduction of the decanters at any time, and would have regarded toasts as an expensive and senseless ceremony. After dinner, for appearance sake we maintained a spasmodic conversation, endeavoring, with indifferent success, not to yawn in one another's faces, until Madge reminded her lord that they had an evening engagement. My father, sighing his relief after their departure, helped himself to one newspaper, and me to another, and

we sat down, on opposite sides of the centre-table, to read the evening news. My step-mother disappeared in the direction of dining-room and pantries, and I saw her no more that night.

We retired early. My father supposed and said that I must be weary after my voyage and would be glad to get into a Christian bed once more. I thought and did not say that he was more weary of the formal welcome-making than I of the sea, and that the effort to "do" the gratified parent had worn hardly upon his invention and patience. No! we were decidedly not an "effusive" family. I had known it for so long that I ought not to have been kept awake by a dull, dreary pain in the region of the heart.

From the date of my father's second marriage, I had understood that the omission of censure signified with him a reasonable degree of satisfaction with what I said or did. He was never otherwise than reasonable, and I should have resembled him if I would have avoided disappointment. There was no necessity that he, or Madge, or my step-mother, should tell me that my return had brightened life for one or all of them;—that they had thought of me longingly and prayed for me with faith and desire that I might quit myself like a man and bring happiness, with credit, to the old home. I ought to have taken these things and much more for granted. That I did not, was selfish and childish.

Nevertheless, as I stood by my open window, too restless to think of wooing sleep, and breathed the soft October air, pure and sweet, even in city streets, I was as homesick as

upon that sighing March night when I read Ailsie's story of St. Valentine's Day in my Paris attic. Gratitude for negative mercies does not spring spontaneously in the breasts of the best men, and I was so many removes from this degree of excellence as to regret, in my gloomy musings, that I had not emulated the example of my associates and sowed a moderate crop of wild oats, in the gay capital, instead of remaining virtuous and wearing myself thin with unappreciated toil. I had won honors at the competitive examinations; had kept my expenses within my allowance, contracted no disreputable habits and no inconvenient intimacies, and I called myself a "spooney," "a muff," and "a greenhorn," for it all, so harsh were the ashes of disappointment between my teeth.

In this mood, I espied a sealed letter, set endwise upon the mantel. Nobody had thought to mention its arrival. More taking for granted! The student of the ways and means of the Haye household would have been amazed at learning how superfluous—judging from our practice—were most of the precautions and amenities prevalent among "sentimental" people.

I have said that I smiled in bitterness in perusing Aunt Evy's postscript, in the rehearsal of the incidents of my "Home Again" dinner. My smile over Ailsie's "full description" of their country home outlingered the sneer. I yearned for a sight of the starry eyes and the dear little brown face. *She* wanted me. I would make her "supremely happy" before I was twenty-four hours older.

I packed my valise for Brightwood within the hour.

"Off already!" ejaculated my step-mother, when I made known my resolve over my breakfast-cup of coffee. "Really I *must* say——"

She compressed her lips to a hairline, and resisted necessity itself.

"I hope, Barry, you have not fallen into unsettled, roving ways abroad?" subjoined my father.

"We will let the future settle that question, sir," I replied, respectfully. "For the present, I should like to have a taste of country air and enjoy a glimpse of an American autumn, before tying myself down to the winter's work."

"You do look rather jaded," concluded the senior, inspecting me narrowly; "I thought last night it might be the effect of sea-sickness, but I see it hasn't worn off."

"It is the *blasé* look of most young students—medical students, in particular—of this generation," said my admirable step-mother, in her saltiest manner.

"If you object, sir, I will relinquish the plan," I said, yet more dutifully, to my real parent, ignoring the side-thrust.

"Not at all, not at all! You are your own master, now. But when you come back I trust I shall see you apply yourself steadily to business."

I ran into Madge's house, on my way to the stage-office, to say "Good bye," and explain my need of mountain-air and quiet.

"I don't blame you for quitting Castle Doleful by the

earliest train," she assured me. "While Aleck and I were there we contrived in one way and another, to keep the air stirring. Since he went South and I got married it has been a dead calm, and a cloudy one most of the time. You know that Clarine Darling was married last winter—don't you? It's queer you should care to run in that direction after Paris life. It is out-and-out country where the Darlings live, and no ladies to entertain you except a married woman, who will be a grandmother soon, and an old maid. But you never were like other people. It will be just your luck to live and die a bachelor."

I had not deceived myself with the notion that my unflattering flight would wound or offend my affectionate relatives. I was but a paltry fraction in the sum of their existence. I hankered—a burning thirst that increased hourly—to be with those to whom my absence had made some "difference;" for whom my arrival would rise into the dignity of an event.

"Barry always did like to be made much of," my step-parent had once remarked severely.

I would not have denied it to-day. I had been a nobody in a crowd of strangers for a year. If somebody did not begin to make much of me soon I should be in danger of losing my individuality outright.

I was not socially disposed during the thirty-mile ride on the top of the coach. I smoked cigarettes by the dozen; drew lazy enjoyment from the beauty of the day and the scenery, and thought out an article upon neuralgic as con-

tradistinguished from rheumatic affections, to keep down impatience at the length of the journey.

The highway was half-a-mile from Brightwood by the nearest approach, and at this point I was set down, with directions from the driver to follow the disused cart-road through the woods as my shortest route. The ruts cut by the winter's hauling were overgrown with grass and wild-flowers. Sumach bushes, whose leaves were blood-tipped lances of flame, upbore cones of maroon velvet, and plumes of golden-rod waved up to my elbow as I put aside the underbrush. Once, a brace of quails whirred from under my feet. Overhead, the trees met and linked arms. The air was delicious with the nutty fragrance never distilled except in hickory woods by October sunshine.

In less than a brief half-hour I should hold my little love in my arms, and hear her say that the lacking element of perfect bliss at Brightwood, the heavenly, was supplied by my appearance. She would be taller than when we parted—perhaps more shy. I might have to woo her cautiously for a time until the rust of non-intercourse was rubbed off. But she would be always Ailsie—a child that had no peer,—and —I owned it without an unworthy shade of self-pity—the being who, of all in the wide world, loved me best, than whom none was more dear to me.

The old road ended abruptly at a loose stone wall enwrapped by a scarlet robe of American ivy, whose tough fibres kept it from tumbling down. Beyond this was a body of maples. I remembered how the "maple woods look as

if they were afire," and stopped to note how just was the comparison. Afire from bole to outermost twig, save that, at long intervals, stood a few, more lush of foliage than their fellows, whose green hearts were the brighter by contrast with the vermilion and orange of the farther branches. Others had burned into purple with a dust of grayish ashes edging the leaves. They colored the very air. Each leaf hung, a motionless and delicate transparency, emitting as well as transmitting light. The grove was between me and the western sky, and the low sun did not penetrate it, yet upon grass and soil and rude wall lay clear, warm shadows, like those cast by glowing sunset clouds.

"Brightwood!" I murmured. "Even without the sunshine!" I passed through the enchanted wood, treading a carpet of such brilliant warp and woof as never came from looms of man's making. A strip of pasture-land succeeded it, then a compact mass of hickories, chestnuts, and oaks, the yellows of the nut-bearing trees shining vividly against the dark crimsons and rich browns worn by the forest monarchs.

From the lower slope of the grove arose the pleasant chime of children's voices, merry in talk. Guided by the sound I gained a coign of advantage behind a clump of chestnut saplings, and surveyed the group, myself safely hidden. A mimic Druidical temple, roofless but for the sky, had been reared in a circular clearing near the foot of the wooded hill, so close to the outskirts of the grove that the sunlight lay in broad streaks and patches across the encompassing row of great stones and the smaller ones that served

the audience as seats. The little area was well filled. I recognized Robby, although he had been promoted to the rank of be-jacketed and be-trousered juvenility in my absence. I surmised that the sweet-faced three-year-old, sitting close to him, was baby Evy. The rest of the children were strangers to me, and all older than these two. They were probably cousinly or neighborly visitors at the farm. There were three or four boys among them, ranging in age from ten to twelve, and one fine lad of fifteen with a handsome Darling face, who, I settled within my own mind, must be Ailsie's favorite cousin "Rick," of whom I had heard much in her letters.

At the moment of my approach he was on his feet, announcing to the assembly that the "performance of the afternoon would be commenced with a song from the celebrated vocalist—Mademoiselle Malibran Jenny Lind Warbleini. Whom I have the honor of introducing to you."

And forth from behind a screen of woven brush stepped the songstress, mounted a platform of rather shaky stones, and bowed her thanks for the burst of applause that saluted her.

My Ailsie! chains of autumn leaves bordering her white frock, girdling her waist, crowning her brown hair. The hue of the brightest of them in her cheeks,—and, a light in her glorious eyes, the soul of the artist who was, for the time, all she would seem.

Crossing her hands lightly, in the gesture once so familiar to me, she began her song, amazing me by the strength and flexibility of her voice, and carrying the attention of her

auditors with her by the distinctness and varying expression of her utterance.

"I have told thee how sweet the roses are
In my home beyond the sea,
Where the dark-eyed maid with her light guitar
Sits under the greenwood tree.
Thou wouldst scorn the fruits of thy mountain home
Beholding the purple vine,—
Then come to the land of my birth, oh come!
Henceforth let my home be thine!

"I have heard thee tell of a sky more blue
And a sun more warm than this;—
And I've sometimes thought—if thy tale were true—
To dwell in that clime were bliss.
But oh! when I gaze on my tranquil cot,
Where the clematis boughs entwine,
The land of the stranger tempts me not;
No! ne'er can thy home be mine!

"I will sing to thee, if with me thou'lt rove,
A song of the olden time.
Thou wilt never compare with my ardent love
The love of this colder clime.
Then, fly, oh fly, from this land of storm,
Where all that is fair must pine,
To scenes more gay and a sun more warm;
Henceforth let my home be thine.

"Alas! it is plain that my mountain home
Must ever be scorned by thee;
And may I not fear that a time may come
When thou wilt have scorn for *me*?"

This with hanging head, and a cadence of mournful doubt. What follows, with a sudden uplifting of the bright face, a triumphant peal in her song :—

"And, oh ! there is one who loves me here,
Whose voice, if less sweet than thine,
To my simple taste is far more dear ; —
No ! ne'er can thy home be mine !"

The storm of plaudits was at its height, even baby's fat palms doing sounding execution, when a touch on my shoulder turned me to meet the laughing faces of Pressley and Wynant Darling, who had stolen up to share my ambush. With mutual admonitions to discretion, we grasped each other's hands, and whispered brief greetings. Then, each sought a loop-hole to watch the progress of the "performances."

"Mademoiselle Malibran Jenny Lind Warbleini lectures quite as admirably as she sings," proclaimed the master of ceremonies—"and has kindly consented to favor us with—ah—one of her most distinguished efforts—one which has earned for her,—ahem !—deathless renown in this and in foreign countries. I trust the audience will remain seated and —ah—superhumanly quiet while she is speaking. Like other great artists, she is exacting on this point."

"Fairly done for Rick !" said Wynant. "Here comes the lecturess !"

She emerged from her leafy retreat with a more staid mien than at her first appearance, as befitted the superior dignity

of the rostrum. She had torn the chaplet from her head in haste that had ruffled the brown waves, and in her hand was a slender roll that looked like a manuscript. This was evidently the symbol of her profession, for she did not offer to unroll it.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said the silvery voice, 'the subject of my lecture, this afternoon, is the Life and Character of Moses."

"Moses who?" called out a boy lounging on the grass at the speaker's left. He was rougher in bearing and tone than his companions and was, Wynant whispered, the son of Ezra Gaskin's city brother, and an interloper upon the Brightwood party.

Regardless of the query, unconsciously plagiarised, many years later, by Mark Twain's "Jack," the lecturer held on her way.

"Moses is regarded by most speakists and book-makers as a great and good man. In fact, something exterordinary for those old, old times. Not quite up to the mark of our wise men ——"

("Dan. Webster, now—What dy'e say to him for a specimen brick?" interrupted Ezra's nephew.)

"You shut up, there!" vociferated the master of ceremonies.

"Let him alone, Rick!" ordered Ailsie, in her ordinary conversational tone. "I'll have no rows while I am speaking.")

"Never-the-less 'most everybody has the idea that Moses

was pretty near perfect. Let us look at the matter. Between you and me, my friends, I never did have much opinion of Moses. There's an awful time made—no end of lecturing and scolding and preaching and nagging—'Where do you expect to go to when you die?' and all such scary stuff, —if a poor little child that hardly knows her right hand from the left ——"

("Nor B from a bull's foot!" from the rude auditor.)

—"happens so much as to crack one of the leastest commandments,—to put her fingers into the sugar-bowl, for instance. Why, Moses broke two tables full of them, and not a word was said to him about it that I ever heard of. Broke them when he was angry, too! Mad as a hatter! That's a way he had—losing his temper. I'll tell you more about it presently. Of course, the people of Israel were very provoking. They were always up to some trick or other. Whining because they hadn't just what they wanted to eat. Boiled meat and onions and leeks and such like victuals—enough to turn one's stomach to think of! And saying 'this light bread'—that meant manna, like the nicest sort of biscuit and honey,—the food angels are satisfied with—wasn't fit for them. Or finding fault with Moses and Aaron, or setting on Korah and Dathan and the other fellow to make another government. Always snarling and restless 'till there was no such thing as living peaceably with them. A pack of Jews, all of them! For that matter Moses was a Jew, too, and he ought to have known how to make allowances for them. And it *was* hard when they were dying in the

desert for water—little wee babies and all—to be scolded as Moses talked to them. 'Hear now, you rebels!' he said—'Have I got to bring water out of this rock for you?' Rebels! Put it to yourselves, now, how you'd like *that!*

'Water, water, *nowhere*,
Not a drop to drink!'

And the sun scorching the life out of you, drying up the tongues in your mouths. Throats hotter than an oven. Out comes Moses, mad as fire, his rod in his hand—'Hear, now, you rebels!' I used to be sorry he was punished for cutting up so shamefully that day—whacking the rock three times, as if 'twas a bad child he was whipping. Now, I think he was served about right. 'Specially when I recollect the poor sheep and oxen and lambs and babies."

("What about the horses and donkeys?" from the city boy.)

"Then, again, my friends, do you suppose that he wasn't angry when he made the children of Israel drink the powder-water? When he had melted down and burned up and ground to powder the golden calf, and strewed it on the water? You'd better believe that was a bitter dose! Worse than salts and senna! I can imagine how he did it. 'There's your lovely calf!' said he. 'You would have it. Now, you've got to take it!'"

"(By George! he wouldn't a' got it down my throat!" from the Gaskin.)

"I don't say that the people weren't to blame. It was awfully wicked in them, and foolish besides, to think that the

Lord didn't care for them because Moses stayed away forty days. Looks as if they had been worshipping Moses all the time, instead of the Lord. It was fearfully sinful in them to make a golden calf."

("Golly! wouldn't I have liked to get a slice of that 'ere veal!" bleated the intruder.)

"Because the Egyptians had worshipped an ox with gold tips to his horns, was no reason they should be so silly. Seems to me they might have remembered that the Egyptian idols weren't of much use to them in the Red Sea, for they went down to the bottom like a stone, and the ox couldn't hook them up. Somehow, I have always pitied the foolish women, who were persuaded into giving up their earrings and never saw them again. I think the powder water must have tasted bitterer to them than to the men."

("Say! ain't you 'most through?" broke in the boor.)

"The Israelites' calf, my friends," pursued the unabashed speaker, dropping each word with studied distinctness, and weight, "as I have said, was made of golden earrings. But there is a calf in my audience"—wheeling like lightning to point a level forefinger in the coarse, homely face, at her left, "who isn't made of earrings—unless they were brass ones!" *

"Ha! ha! ha! Good enough for you, Ailsie!" roared Rick, and his laugh was sent back with a will by the ambushed anditors.

The children jumped up at the unexpected chorus, and

* A literal report.

crowded towards us, hustling the now blushing "lecturess" along with them.

"Papa! it wasn't fair! Uncle Wy! I didn't think I'd ever catch *you* eaves-dropping!" was her cry.

In the midst of the protest her glance fell upon me, as I hung back still partially concealed by the clump of saplings. Every drop of blood left her face; she clasped her hands with a quick convulsive movement, her eyes fastening upon mine in wild incredulity that looked like terror. Really fearing that she would faint, I darted past her father and uncle, and caught her hands.

"Ailsie! little Ailsie! are you not glad to see me?"

Her face was hidden in my bosom, and I felt that she was shaking like a leaf, but there was no sound of welcome. I think her father gave the signal to Wynant to call off the spectators, for he set up a whoop:

"Hare and hounds! here he goes!" and tore off down the slope with a yelling crowd in pursuit.

We were left to ourselves—Ailsie and I. Sitting down upon a stone, I drew her to my knee, stroked the bright head I loved so fondly; kissed it once and again before I could win her to look or speech.

"You see—" she said, at length, throwing off the spell with a resolute effort, shaking back her hair, and granting me a view of her countenance, to which the color was beginning to flow back—"I did not know you were on this side of the Atlantic ocean! You must not think I am not glad: I've wanted you *so!*"

Her heart beat fast against my arm. She laid her face to mine, the smooth brown cheek the touch of which was a delight, and we were still for a while. In my moved soul I was thanking Him who had brought me to this good hour; who had glorified my life by the gift of love so pure and strong as that which lived in the bosom of this child. I often felt like praying when I was with her, seldom when I was not. I had expected a joyous welcome, yet such as children offer the long-absent, in which rejoicing is blent with diffidence. The character and might of the emotion excited by my appearance were a revelation even to me, who had believed that I had gauged the deeps of a nature none understood, who gave it only such casual study as we are wont to bestow upon sprightly little girls between eight and nine years old.

"I landed in America yesterday morning, Ailsie," I said presently. "This morning I set out for Brightwood, to see you. It makes me very happy to find my darling so well, and that she did not forget me in all the long months I have spent away from her."

"That couldn't be, you know," she returned with earnest simplicity. "If you had stayed away twelve years instead of one, I should have remembered you. You can't ever forget anybody you really love. Now you must come to Aunt Evy. It is selfish in me to keep you all to myself, when she can't come to meet you."

Ailsie all over! The same daintiness of articulation and quaint brief sentences that said much and meant more.

The same gentle thoughtfulness for others' comfort and happiness. The same frank delicacy that lent subtle charm to her love-talk.

We walked down the easy decline to the plateau on which the house was built. The shadows of the curious "crooked trees" belting one side of the lawn stretched lazy lengths upon the turf. The lake was a truthful mirror of the embosoming hills, with their cloaks and scarfs of many colors streaming to the water's edge. On the distant mountains was the royal purple which is Autumn's richest garniture.

"It always puts me in mind of the anthem, "Put on thy beautiful garments," said Ailsie, checking me to point out the witchery of light, color, and shadow. "It sings itself in my head all day, since the woods changed their dresses. It is good we are having moonlight nights now. I shall be terrif-i-*cally* disappointed if you don't like my Brightwood."

## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE MEMORIAL PINE.

"THE veritable site of the garden of Eden," remarked Aunt Evy, gravely, next morning, as Ailsie broke up a prolonged conference between us in the little room which was the temporary "Innermost." The "Chamber of the Confessional," Wynant called it.

Ailsie and I—how naturally the words fell together again!—were going nutting. For this day she would have no third person along. "Mamma" had packed our luncheon in a basket which I was to carry while full, and she when it was empty. The same rule was to be observed in the disposition of a stouter one that was to bring our nuts home.

"I mean to show you all my wonders," she said, speaking very fast. "Pine Hollow, and Sunset Rock, and the Witches' Glen, and the Fairies' Ball-room, and the Mountain of the Cross. There isn't one of them that isn't lovely, and nearly all belong to Brightwood. You don't begin to know what a place it is."

"The veritable site of the garden of Eden," her aunt

interrupted at this point. "It would not be possible to convince her, or her father, that the stump of the ancient apple-tree in the lower pasture is not the very one around which Eve found the serpent twined, on that fatal morning so many fruit-seasons ago."

"That's only her fun!" explained Ailsie, apologetically for her volatile relative. "Of course I know that Eden was in Asia and had four rivers with hard names running through it."

"Brightwood is Eden for you to-day, happy child! Enjoy every minute and second. Take care of her, Barry!"

The rosy and the pale faces lay together on the pillow, for an instant, for Aunt Evy was a prisoner to her lounge.

"You are the onliest person I would invite to go with us," said Ailsie, running back from the door for still another embrace. "Auntie! really and truly I wish I could be sick instead of you for awhile. It would be jolly to think, as well as the pain in my back and head would let me, how you were climbing the hills and scampering down the other side. And when you and Mr. Barry came home in the evening, how I should enjoy hearing all about it!"

"You would lend him to me, too, would you, as well as your strong limbs and healthy lungs?" The invalid smiled, but the water stood deep in her eyes. "Thank Heaven, dear, that it is not in your power to offer the sacrifice, and that it does not rest with me to say whether it shall be accepted or declined! Now, be off! and make much of Mr. Barry, while you have him, and of Brightwood, too; October vacations are not endless."

"Barry likes to be made much of!" rang in my ears in dry-salted tones, very unlike the accents that had commended the process to my guide. To prove that benevolence was not extirpated by this selfish "liking," I devoted myself to making much of my charge. So tender was my every thought of her, that rarely perfect day that I would willingly have borne her in my arms over stone, stubble and hillock. But in order not to offend her harmless pride in her own woodcraft and pedestrianism, I had to content myself with carrying both baskets and lending a helping hand when a wide brook was to be crossed, or a tall fence surmounted. For the rest of the way, she trudged on sturdily beside me, doing the honors of October and the landscape, talking as fast as her tongue could go. The red wine of health and happiness was in her veins, heart-sunshine in the eyes that sought mine, continually, with an exultant sense of actual possession and proprietorship that was both pretty and diverting.

She would never weary me with fondlings—this dainty little betrothed of mine. Unless taken by surprise, tact and good taste alike warned her against effusiveness. The maidenliness of her demeanor, to-day, was inimitable and suggestive. With such refinement of tenderness and real dignity, I felt sure she would, ten years hence, assign to a lover his position and privileges. Last evening, she had scarcely stirred from my side, and seldom spoken except when directly addressed. Now she meant business. We were out to see the country—her "wonders" included, and

to gather nuts. She had a story for each of the spots she had designated—incident or adventure belonging to the history of the summer, or traditions more or less well-substantiated, which she had picked up in her free-and-easy intercourse with the country-people. We made no haste. There was a liberal stretch of daylight ahead of us. We "did" the notable places thoroughly and gathered nuts when we stumbled over them, provided they were free from husk and burr.

"Beating them out doesn't pay when they can be had without smashing one's fingers between two stones," observed Ailsie, oracularly, turning over the dry leaves with the toe of her boot, to uncover chance treasures. "It's a good plan to get things without trouble when there's no harm in it. Some people think nothing is worth having that comes easy. Water and air and sunshine ought to teach them that they are mistaken, but, dear me! the quantity of stupid men and women and children in this world is absolutly as-ton-ish-ing! Don't put those into the basket, please! They are pig-nuts. And very poor taste—even for them—the pigs must have, if they like that sort of food. They aren't more than half as big as hickory-nuts to begin with. Then, the shells are twice as thick, and when you've worked your way to the stingy scrap of a kernel, it's as bitter as gall. You remember what Mr. Weller says about the charity-boy and the alphabet? 'It's a question whether it is worth while to go through so much to get so little.'"

"I recollect! I did not suppose you had made Mr. Weller's acquaintance yet."

"I read Pickwick in the early part of the summer. It's a nice book to take out under the trees on a hot day. Papa thought I couldn't appreciate it, but I liked what I did understand. It doesn't take much brains to be amused at the fat boy, and Mr. Winkle's riding and hunting, and Mrs. Leo Hunter's 'Expiring Frog.' Nor at the Wellers. I was quite worried to find that the stage-driver who brought us here was a dried-up, sober little man, who couldn't say anything but '*Geet*-up!' and 'Whoa-there!'"

We lunched sumptuously under a chestnut tree on the brow of a green hill. Soft grass grew up to its roots. The long, sharply serrated leaves were of a fine, clear lemon-color, and the light strained through these painted the turf in lively tints that made the shaded area about us as fair as the sunny slopes beyond. The air was still, but we drew in balm and sweetness with every breath, for back of the chestnutted knoll lay heights darkly clad with hemlock, cedar and fir, sunbeams and wind asleep together in the topmost branches. Before us rolled the hill, gradually, for a few rods, then steeply down to the little river that fed the lake to the left. A bridge crossed it just before the widening into the pond, and the occasional rattle of a country wagon over it varied the rural hum that went pleasantly with the mellow sunlight, the resinous and nutty smells. There were sheep in the lower meadows, cows in the upper, and from farm-houses, hidden by hills and wood-belts, came the crowing of answering cocks, and, once in a while, the deep bay of a hound. A parliament of crows sat in a tall hemlock on the

next spur of the ridge, at a distance that took the harshness out of their discussions before they reached us.

We were hardly aware that we heeded the out-door concert, yet it filled up the pauses in our dialogue with the pulsing of low music. Our talk took on a pensive tone with our unconscious listening. Our lunch basket was empty, and with satisfied appetites, we lay along the hill-top, our elbows cushioned in the soft tussocks of wild grass, taking in full, slow draughts of enjoyment, as the connoisseur pours down a beaker of brown old October ale.

"Do you see my cross?" asked Ailsie, pointing to the summit of the opposing range of hills, higher and more rugged than on our side of the valley. "On the second—the highest mountain. Almost to the top. There! you are looking straight at it. Isn't it a very strange thing?"

It was. A tree—apparently a pine—towering above the horizon-line of the forest, and forming with upright trunk and transverse arms, a symmetrical and well-defined cross against the tender blue of the October heavens.

"It's been there, maybe, a hundred years," said my cicerone, meditatively, surveying the land-mark with eyes full of mysterious meaning. "It just grew into that shape of itself, the people about here say. But it does seem as if GOD may have meant it all along. For He knew what was to happen on that hill, one day—when the time came. There's something that makes you feel very solemn in thinking how that tree kept growing, growing, growing, year by year, putting out one little bunch of leaves at a time, first on this side,

then on that, and, all the while, making the cross that was to be a sign to everybody, by-and-by, to remind them of the poor lost children."

"What children?"

"You don't mean you never heard of them? Pshaw! I keep forgetting how long and how far you've been away, and that all this part of the country is new to you. It seems so natural to have you around, I can't think how it was before you came."

She sat up, gathered her hands full of pale yellow leaves from the grass and shred them into her lap while the story grew; now looking at them and seeing nothing but the scenes of the tragedy, again gazing at the memorial pine with eyes that went yet further and made her own the secrets of the Unseen.

"I've thought, a thousand times, since I heard about them first, how odd it was that it should have happened that very Christmas-night when you and I had tea by ourselves in our comfortable parlor at home. I was sorry I had said how jolly it was that it was storming, while we sat by the warm fire and read the 'Ancient Mariner,' and talked about so many delightful things. Do you remember teaching me—

> 'And resembles sorrow only,
> As the mists resemble the rain'?

How little we know!

"There were three of them. All boys. The oldest wasn't more than ten years old. The youngest was

five. Their father and mother were poor, and lived in a small house quite on the other side of the mountain. On that Christmas day—it didn't snow here in the morning as it did in town—about three o'clock, they told their mother that they had found in the morning a hickory-nut tree in the woods that nobody else could have known anything about, because the ground was covered thick with nuts. Might they go to pick them up? She said, 'Yes.' They were mountain children, you see, and used to running wild by themselves. Off they went, each with a little tin pail, and full of fun over their nutting frolic. I suppose it was a great affair to them, who couldn't run out to candy-stores whenever they got a penny. 'Tisn't likely pennies were plenty with them either. Pretty soon it began to snow. You remember how the wind whistled and sang and groaned in our chimney that night after tea? Over there, in those woods on the mountain, it *roared!* Like a thousand wild beasts.

"The boys' father had been down in the village three miles away. When he got home it was almost dark. He found his wife alone and pretty nearly crazy. She had been as far in the woods as she dared go, and called the boys at the top of her voice. They had not answered and they had not come home. The father took a lantern and set out to look for them. He wandered up and down, shouting out their names. No answer but the roaring of the wind and the rattling of the hail. When he was half frozen he had to go in out of the storm. Early next morning, although it was

still storming hard, he went to some of the neighbors and got them to help him look for his lost sons. More and more people came next day and next and the next. At last there were more than a hundred men roaming through the woods with dogs and guns and horns—making a great noise, beating every bush, and looking in every stream and hollow.

"Still no children, not a sign to tell which way they had gone, any more than if the ground had opened and swallowed them up.

"Some people thought they had been murdered. Some said they had strayed to some other place, maybe to some town and been taken into an asylum, or somebody's house. Some were sure they had fallen into a pond or river, and were frozen under the ice. The hundred men got tired hunting for them and went home. The father and mother went to their home, too. It must have been fearfully lonesome now that the three little fellows were not there."

The busy hands rested upon the pile of shred leaves. She looked at me dubiously.

"I don't exactly know about telling you the rest. It won't sound true, or a single speck likely to you. But it *is* true. The man told papa about it himself this summer. Papa had never quite believed it until then. But why shouldn't GOD be able to talk to people in dreams now as He used to? And, since everybody had stopped hunting for the children, how else could they have been found? This man had a dream one night. He thought he was walking up the mountain and saw a flock of crows flying about

the top of a high pine-tree. Something or somebody told him to go to that place, and when he got there, he saw the three lost boys. In the morning he could not get rid of the dream. He set out in his wagon in the direction of the mountain and rode three or four miles before he came in sight of a tree that looked just like the one he had dreamed of. The crows were flying around the top. I suppose as those are doing over yonder, and cawing in the same way. The man, who had a friend with him, got out of the wagon and went up the mountain, over the stones and bushes, straight to the foot of the big pine-tree. And there, really and truly, lay the three boys, all dead. It had been ten days since they went to look for the Christmas nuts. On the top of a great flat rock lay the oldest boy. He had hardly any clothes on. The next boy was on the ground a little way off. Right under the rock, in a sort of a hollow that it leaned over—like this—" making an inclined plane of one palm over the other—"was the babyest of them, wrapped up in his oldest brother's jacket and trowsers, on a bed of dried leaves, just as his mother might have tucked him up in his crib at home."

She stripped leaf after leaf into threads, her face set in serious compassion very unlike the emotion a child might be expected to evince in the telling of such a grievous tale.

"It is as you say, a very strange story,"* I said. "Strange and sad."

"Yes, sad, if we look at it one way. But that boy died a

* But true in every particular.

glorious death. When Aunt Evy heard the story she said—'Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.' You can think how she would say it. I wonder why he climbed that big rock. The men who found them thought they must have been frozen to death on Christmas night. It was such frightful weather. They had strayed over the top of the mountain and gone some distance down the other side, trying to find the way home. Do you suppose he got up there so as to see farther when morning came? He had pulled his arm out of one shirt-sleeve as if he had begun to take it off. No doubt he heard his little brother crying with the cruel cold, and wanted to give him more cover. The last thing he did was to try to help him."

"Is that the pine-tree?" inquired I, looking at the gigantic cross with moved interest.

"No! it is farther down on this side. We went there once with papa. It was very solemn. Aunt Evy couldn't go, of course, but she sent flowers to lay on the big rock. She called it a pilgrimage. I couldn't help wishing the rock could speak and tell us what really happened that dark stormy night. We saw where the baby-brother had been put to sleep. Mamma cried. I saw the tears drop on her hand when she stooped down and smoothed the dead leaves as if he had been asleep under them still. We all talked in whispers—even Robby. The cross-tree is on the tip-top of the mountain. Likely, the boys passed under it in the dark without seeing it. Aunt Evy says it is their monument, all the same. She can see it from her window, and she says it

helps her to be patient when she is in great pain. She calls the biggest boy her hero. If you could see her, sometimes, in one of her bad spells, you would think she was a heroess."

The word slipped out so smoothly and suddenly that gravity on my part was an impossibility. Luckily, she was not looking at me, or she would have detected the untimely glimmer, and been dumb for the next hour. Her dread of making herself ridiculous equaled her desire to promote a comfortable frame of mind in others.

She was emptying her lap of the torn leaves, leisurely and reflectively, her mind still upon her "hero."

"I dare say," she continued, as if in soliloquy—"that boy didn't know how to read and write. He was poor and wore patched clothes, and talked bad grammar, perhaps. But he knew how to suffer and die for somebody he loved. That was enough for one person's life-time. If he had been fifty years old, instead of ten, he couldn't have done it better. I think when the morning came, he saw *very* far from the top of that rock—much farther than he had expected, when he climbed it. As Stephen did, you know, when they stoned him."

She shook out the fragments of leaf and stem from her frock, and strolled down the hill, a little way, for wild flowers, returning soon with a handful which she displayed gleefully, quoting:

"But on the hill the golden-rod
And the aster in the wood,
And the yellow sunflower by the brook
In autumn beauty stood."

"Aunt Evy taught that to me when I was six years old. Every Fall since then, I have made a bouquet for her of the three flowers. 'Crown jewels,' she says they are. I am thankful the sunflower does not mean the ugly monsters your Mrs. Gaskin used to have along her garden-fence. Great, staring bold things—big as a dinner-plate, with a brown tea-plate in the middle."

"Why do you say—'your Mrs. Gaskin' so spitefully, Ailsie?" remonstrated I, plaintively. "I haven't seen her in two years. And I certainly did not correspond with her while I was abroad."

"She stopped to speak to us after church, last Sunday," was the reply. "And asked where you were and 'how long you were goin' to stay in furren parts, and were you studyin' the doctor's trade over there?' Mr. 'Ezry' 'guessed you'd be proper spry and stuck-up against you came back, and thin as a rail, a-livin' on frogs and snails.' I *wish* everybody who wants to be witty about French people wouldn't feel obliged to talk of such disgusting things. Such as eating frogs and snails, I mean. They're all right in their proper place. But that isn't upon Christians' tables. Nor in their mouths. Tcha!"

Resuming her seat upon the elastic tussock, she arranged her flowers, singing to herself; setting her graceful head on this side and on that, to judge of the effect of purple-and-gold, touching up the cluster with delicate ferns and winding the stems with wire-grass.

Watching her from the shadow of my hat-brim, in lazy

content, I began to succumb to the combined influences of warm sweet air, mellowed sunlight and music. The effect of the fatiguing voyage and stage ride, the excitement of arrival and welcome, were, in this first hour of absolute rest, appreciable in a luxurious lassitude that stole from limb to brain. I could imagine nothing more divine, said my drowsy fancy, than thus to lie, and look, and dream, for a week—why not for a month—why not forever? The lotus-eater's "myrrh-bush on the height" was of a lively and scentless growth, in comparison with the languorous droop and subtle aroma of the lemon-tinted leaves, through which I stared upward. The hill-top grasses, uncut and ungrazed, were supple in their dryness, They pillowed my head, without tickling my ears and nose. The earth was tempered to her heart, by weeks of perfect weather.

"Talk of sunny France, indeed!" I ejaculuted in a fine disdain. "It and Italia may go to—Ballyhack!"

Ailsie glanced around and smiled, without intermitting her crooning.

"*Chêrie!*" said I, benevolent and complacent. "You will be a marvellous singer, when your voice shall have got its growth. But we will not go to Italy to cultivate it. We will spend four months of the year, always including October, at Brightwood, and come out every day to this enchanted mount where you can sing as loudly and as long as we like, with the echoes to encore you."

"And the crows?" queried my cantatrice demurely.

"The crows be shot! Sing me a love-song, Ailsie! And

then another. And still another, until you are tired, or I beg you to stop."

I pulled my hat low over my eyes.

She laughed. A ripple of fun which recalled my slipping senses for a moment.

"There are all sorts of love-songs. Will you have a killing one, or a dolesome, or a lively one?"

"Nothing murderous, if you love me! The day is too delicious, and I am in too good a humor. Something between the dolesome and the lively. I don't want to be driven to melancholy, nor waked up too decidedly."

She preluded for awhile, humming a few bars each, of different airs, then trolled, with spirited emphasis, a ballad I guessed at once was drawn from Aunt Evy's repertory.

"Gather ye rose-buds while ye may
Old Time is still a-flying,
And this same flower that smiles to-day
To-morrow will be dying.

"The glorious lamp of heaven, the Sun,
The higher he's a-getting,
The sooner will his race be run,
The nearer he's to setting.

"That age is best which is the first,
When youth and blood are warmer,
But, being spent, the worse and worse
Times still succeed the former.

"Then, be not coy, but use your time,
And while ye may, go marry;
For having lost but once your prime
You may forever tarry."

"You are hard on a fellow who'll be 'almost a hundred when you are one-and-twenty!'" I complained in a muffled tone, by reason of drowsiness and hat-brim. "But go on! I am at your mercy!"

She put out her hand to pat mine.

"Poor little fellow! Did it wake up? Sh-sh-sh! Love-songs aren't the best sleep-songs after all.

'Hush-a-by baby, on the *hill*-top,

would be better. Or," launching her fresh young voice upon a new and full tide of melody—

"Peaceful slumbering on the ocean,
Seamen fear no danger nigh;
The winds and waves in gentle motion,
Soothe them with their lullaby,
Lullaby!"

Thus far, I followed her intelligently. The next thing I knew, or thought I knew—I was stretched upon the deck of the steamer that brought me home,—a thousand miles of blue sailless sea before, and two thousand behind me; pure woolly clouds fainting into nothingness in the zenith, the swish of the waves and the measured throb of the engine hushing me into slumber. Then I swung in a hammock woven of wire-grass and lined with wild hay, lashed to the

lowest branches of the chestnut. The amber light trickled, in a warm, perfumed fluid, upon my eyelids—a sleeping potion I could not withstand, struggle though I did when I became aware that Ailsie, a band of "crown-jewels" in her hair, was swaying me back and forth, and chanting her lullaby.

After that, "all was nought and nought was all," until something—a grasshopper, I thought, in the confusion of awakening—lit upon my nose, with a prodigious number of titillating feet and mandibles, all going at once. Jerking up a hand to dislodge him, I blinded myself with a shower of gay leaves that rustled smartly in falling. I was snowed under, a foot deep, with them, red, russet, amethyst, orange—they went flying before my sight when I would have arisen, like scraps of a desiccated but fadeless rainbow.

"Ailsie!" I cried, in feigned distress.

There was no reply. I repeated the call in a shout that brought the echoes hurrying down from the heights in the rear. I was alone where I had fallen asleep. The sun was not a couple of yards above the highest of the western hills. I must have slept long and hard. I freed myself from the motley coverlet, combed divers persistent leaves with my fingers from my hair and whiskers, and sought for my hat in the débris. It was set spikily with the stiff-stemmed "crown-jewels," until there was not room to thrust another under the band. An enormous bouquet of the same was pinned in my button-hole. I had bracelets and leg-bangles of golden-rod tied with tough grass.

Verily, my guardian fairy had made good use of her time and the depth of my siesta! I was surveying my numerous and ingenious adornments when a peal of laughter betrayed the artificer's lurking-place.

Peeping around the thick trunk of the chestnut, she sang out, mockingly—

> "Robin Redbreast, painful*ly*,
> Did cover him with leaves."

Leaving her covert she danced around me, delighting in the success of the trick, and not unlike a saucy robin in her scarlet sacque and russet skirt.

"You can't think how interesting you looked! Do you always sleep so soundly? You didn't budge even when I put on your bracelets. It was Rip Van Winkle over again. You might not have waked up in twenty years if I hadn't tickled your nose. Here's the fellow that did it!" showing a long switch with a bunch of grass tied on the end. "How you did slap at him!"

Overcome by the recollection, she sank down to laugh until the tears started.

"Ailsie!" I uttered, solemnly. "Did you ever hear of a woman named Delilah?"

"Thought of her all the time I was dressing you up, and burying you alive!" she declared. "If I could have found seven green withs long enough to bind your hands and feet, you would have had harder work to get out of your patch-work shroud. Let this be a lesson to you, young gentleman, not to trust the feminine *sect!*"

"Well! what do you think of Eden?" inquired Aunt Evy, that evening, when we had displayed our spoils of nuts, flowers and painted leaves.

I glanced at Ailsie, who, nowise disconcerted, made a grimace of defiance.

"I liked Eden," I responded, slowly and mournfully. "I had no fault to find with it, nor with Eve, until she tricked and betrayed me."

"Fifty-one, fifty-two!" counted Ailsie dropping her nuts into a tin pan. "So, I am Eve—am I? Fifty-three, fifty-four. Good enough! I expected to be called the serpent!"

## CHAPTER XVII.

### HOW ONE PROMISE WAS KEPT.

THE three coldest days I have felt within my recollection fell on Thanksgiving Thursdays. One of these, the 27th of November, 18—, is still remembered in the Northern and Middle States by the elders of this generation, as having been exceptionally and most unexpectedly severe.

It had snowed all day of the 25th. The 26th was cloudy and "soft," the foot of snow packing hard of its own weight, as it grew "soggy." We arose on Thursday morning to find it frozen solid by brisk north-west winds. The sky was like pale-blue glass, the air crisp and sparkling. But nobody spoke of unusual cold until after the nine o'clock bells had rung for the early service which was reckoned a convenience in some churches on account of the rush outward from the city in later trains, thousands seeking the homes of their rustic forbears on this, if on no other anniversary.

I was the solitary representative of my father's household at church, that forenoon, and, instead of sustaining the

family reputation in our own pew, I occupied a corner in a roomy and more cheerful one in the sanctuary in which the Darlings worshipped. Pressley and his wife were there and welcomed me with silent cordiality, as I entered the seat. Robby, now a fine urchin of six, smiled broadly and reached a chubby hand to me across his father's knee. We four sat out the simple, fervent service, in company, but I, at least, in less thankfulness and content than if the vacant place at my side had been filled as I hoped and expected it would be. Ailsie's right to sit by me, to sing from the same book, and, after service, to walk hand-in-hand with me to her father's door, was so well-established by precedent that nobody thought of remarking upon it.

I had come to church in a pleasant—as I believed, a devotional mood, that Thanksgiving day. Six months before, I had, thanks to the influence of friends—Mr. Darling among them—been appointed to a responsible position in a large hospital. Every day since had made its mark upon my life. For the first time I had the opportunity to grapple at close quarters with disease, and wrestle with it unhindered by interference from those who, I could not but suspect often, and sometimes know, were more unfit to dictate than was I to act. I had been singularly successful. Men of wisdom and experience in the profession began to speak of it to me and to others. My patients were grateful and showed me that they were. I loved my work. It was prospering in my hands. It was meet that I should devote some portion of this holiday—and holidays were rare with

me—to acknowledgments to Him who had brought me by large and gracious paths to an outlook so encouraging.

I was disappointed by Ailsie's absence. I had engaged to meet her at church and dine at her father's. And I had a story to tell her of the rapid improvement of a child who had been brought to the hospital ten days ago. She was a pretty little thing, just Ailsie's age, her malady, a painful affection of the hip. In the appealing yet trustful regards of her dark eyes, in her courage, docility and innate refinement, she had brought my little love to my mind many times. I had talked to her of Ailsie, when I had a spare minute in which I could sit by her and try to cheat her into forgetfulness of suffering; had promised that she would send her books and flowers, perhaps write to her a charming note, such as I had from her every few days. I had even showed her the ambrotype set in a locket, which I always carried in my breast-pocket, attached to a chain of silky-brown hair, with an occasional thread of gold flashing through the braid. I had begged for the picture, and had it set. The chain was my birthday present. For somebody remembered and made festival upon my birthdays now.

"She looks sorrowful—somehow—out of her eyes," Abby had said, after a protracted scrutiny of the miniature.

"She is merry as the day is long," I answered quickly.

Others had made a similar comment upon the pictured eyes. One sentimental cousin of mine had stated oracularly, "that a lurking melancholy and far-off gaze in the eye were universally regarded as a presage of early and violent death."

and cited Charles I. and Major André as examples of the truth of the sign.

I had never admired the sentimental cousin, and after this speech, I mentally added a want of common sense and tact to the list of her imperfections.

I did not like Abby's criticism and my accent probably betrayed my distaste, for she said: "I beg your pardon!" in her old-womanish way and hastened to tell me that she "was sure from looking at her that the young lady was beautiful and good."

"She is not a young lady yet," I smiled. "She will not be ten years old until Christmas Eve. But she is good, and to my eyes beautiful. She is my dearest friend, for all she is so young."

"Christmas Eve!" repeated the sick child, eagerly. "Folks born on Christmas Eve can never see ghosts. My grandmother used to say so."

"My little friend will be glad to hear that," said I, laughing. "For, between you and me, she is easily frightened. I dare say she was brave enough naturally, but she has had two or three bad shocks. One from a drunken man, another during a thunderstorm. These have shaken her nerves a little. But she will outgrow all that. You young people get over many things that older ones could not bear."

"Where is Ailsie?" was my inquiry of her father before we left the pew, after the benediction. "Is Aunt Evy worse?"

"On the contrary, she is remarkably comfortable. But

Wynant was in town, visiting his Dulcinea, on Monday, and insisted on taking Ailsie back with him. He wanted to teach her how to skate. She wanted to learn and her grandparents wanted to see her, so we let her go upon condition that she should be home again in season to eat her thanksgiving dinner with us. The supposition that she could be storm-stayed for three days at this season never occurred to us. So heavy a fall of snow in November is phenomenal in this latitude."

In the church porch we were met by a breeze that cut like a razor. A steady wind swept down the street—not blusteringly—but with even persistence that was more cruel. A thermometer hung without the door of the nearest drug-shop, and Pressley stepped aside to consult it.

"A fall of twenty degrees in an hour-and-a-half!" he said with a whistle. "Sharp work that!"

Aunt Evy met us in the hall when we got home—pale and anxious.

"You don't imagine that harum-scarum boy Wynant will think of bringing Ailsie across the country in this fierce weather, do you?" she asked of her brother-in-law.

He looked actually vexed at the suggestion.

"Give my father and mother credit for some grains of common sense, if Wynant *is* hare-brained and in love!" he said. "Do you think that they would trust the child in an open sleigh, for a thirty-mile drive with the thermometer below zero?"

Miss Marr drew a relieved breath.

"I might have been sure of that, for myself. But recollecting that Wynant is in love with our fair neighbor, and presumably supplied with inward heat enough to enable him to attempt the north-west passage without danger of freezing, and how positively Ailsie promised to dine with us to-day—But there is no rhyme—or reason, which is rarer—in tormenting you as I have tormented myself ever since the mercury of the thermometer in the library began to fall. What a bitter day for Thanksgiving! Heaven pity the poor, and those who travel by sea or land!"

There were roaring fires in both parlors and in the dining-room, which was *en suite* with them. Sitting about the hearth in the front room, we could see the glitter of the flames in three fire-places, and reflected in as many mirrors. Yet the ladies sent for shawls and kept the children between them, as near the grate as they dared push them without scorching their holiday attire, while Pressley and I checked ourselves every few minutes in the act of rubbing our hands as we had been obliged to do in the street to maintain equable circulation. The wind got into the house and at us through a hundred hitherto unsuspected chinks and cracks. There were icy rills of draughts that crept down the backs of our necks, and boldly nipping airs that wrung our noses to the sneezing-point, and others still that played the mischief with our toes.

It was not until Pressley had visited the cellar in person to adjust every valve below and opened every register on the first floor, and the waves of invisible heat almost out-roared the

flames in the chimney, that we could, with the most amiable desire to seem comfortable, begin to talk of anything except the terrific weather.

"It was kind in you to come to us in spite of Ailsie's absence," said Aunt Evy, ceasing to chafe Robby's red fingers and bidding him spread them for himself, before the blaze. "Our chagrin at her non-arrival would have been redoubled had you also failed us. Dear little Chippy! much as we miss her, not one of us feels the trial as she does. She left all manner of messages with me for you. One was that she "didn't believe she could have gone even to grandpa's, had she not been sure that you could not get off from the hospital before Thursday."

"I told her so, on Sunday," I replied. "She forgets nothing, and nobody."

"Certainly never her overgrown sweetheart," said her father. "Were she one whit less affectionate to me, I could find it in my heart to be jealous of you, sometimes. When do you two mean to stop this farce of love-making? She will be a tall girl in a couple of years more. Before you know it, she will pitch you adrift in favor of some callowling of sweet seventeen, who is just convalescing from the "goslings."

"I won't borrow trouble," I rejoined. "It will be time enough, 'all around my hat to wear a green willow,' when she jilts me. I shall give the green gosling a fight before I abandon the field to him."

"Ailsie likes goslings," interjected Robby, intelligently

intent upon our discourse, and quite equal to the theme. "She had a tame one at Brightwood, in the summer-time. She used to carry it about in her apron and pet it because it had a lame foot, and the others pecked it, 'specially the banty roosters. I guess it's turned to a great ugly goose by now."

"They will do it, dear!" Aunt Evy stroked the face turned from one to another in blank amaze at the shout of laughter evoked by his innocent venture. "That's a very common fault with goslings, you may tell Dr. Haye. They won't stay nice and yellow, and downy."

"Like the callowling's beard," said I, ostentatiously caressing my extremely satisfactory whiskers. "I am sorry that you all have not a juster estimate of Ailsie's taste. But time will vindicate it."

By the time the hands of the mantel clock pointed to twelve, we were so far thawed out as to exhibit lively interest in the movements of the sparsely scattered pedestrians, who hurried by our windows, their shoulders and ears on a level, and, oftener than not, both hands bound over the latter. We were not yet so embruted by prosperity as to find food for merriment in their misery.

"It is a matter for anxious speculation what can take them abroad when all sensible people are supposed to be housed for the day, making ready to devour their own or their neighbor's turkey," philosophized Aunt Evy. "Hark! there are the first sleigh-bells I have heard in three hours. Who but a lunatic or a native Nova Zemblan can be on pleasure bent to-day?"

With one impulse of curiosity, we all crowded about the window, for the bells were tinkling wildly, madly, through our street.

I heard a groan, very like an imprecation, from Mr. Darling, before I had a view of a sleigh heaped with wolf-robes drawn up to the curb-stone, and a figure alighting from it. Yet I reached it first, dashed down the furs and lifted my darling out in my arms.

"She's all right! a perfect trump!" cried Wynant, gayly. "The gamiest little one ever made!"

I passed him in silence. I had no time or strength for speech, for the weight I bore was limp and heavy as one just dead.

"In here!" gasped the mother from the parlor-door.

I laid her instead upon the sofa in her father's library as the coldest room on that floor. With all my horrified haste I could recollect how we had been hugging the fire for two hours as the only source of comfort. The child's features were muffled in a double veil. My hands trembled in tearing it off. What should I see?

Her eyes were open; her face blenched into frosted bloodlessness, her lips rigid and blue. But she looked at me! I saw this, although the others did not, and composure, at which I now marvel, possessed me, quieted nerve—almost quelled apprehension. Professional instinct and address rallied in support of my calmness. There are no more faithful handmaidens of the will, when they have been cultivated into a second nature.

"She is conscious!" I said. "She will be better soon. Mr. Darling, will you help me carry her up to bed at once? Let nobody but her mother come with us."

Wynant was sobbing like a big baby when, at two o'clock, I carried the tidings down-stairs that Ailsie had passed from the paroxysm of dumb nausea succeeding the deadly chill, into natural warmth and sleep, and that, while lapsing into this, she had been induced to swallow a few spoonfuls of hot soup.

Aunt Evy had been striving to console the author of the mischief, herself pallid as a ghost, wan and aged as by a month's illness.

"Is she out of danger?" she asked of me, directly, her eyes compelling the truth.

"I hope—I believe so. Unless inflammation and fever should supervene."

"Don't say there is a doubt of it!" groaned Wynant, dropping his head again into his hands. "If you don't want me to go out and hang myself! Or blow out my brains!"

"Perhaps before you indulge in either recreation, you will be kind enough to tell us how you reconciled it with your conscience to risk the child's life to gratify your own selfish desires!" said his brother, severely, beginning to pace the room with great strides.

We all understood what Pressley's carpet and lawn promenades meant, and the gleaming eyes that went with the compressed lips.

Wynant was too humble to take offence; very grateful for the opportunity to explain that he was less culpable than

would appear from circumstantial evidence. He had attempted to fulfil his engagement to bring Ailsie home on the preceding day. The roads were well broken for sleighs for a couple of miles beyond his father's outer gates. There was no misgiving, even in the mind of the prudent old squire, of any probable difficulty in making the thirty miles in five hours. Accordingly, Wynant left the farm-house door at eleven o'clock in the forenoon, with his precious charge, in a strong sleigh with two excellent horses. Before they had gone three miles, they ran into a heavily-drifted road over which nothing but a few wheeled vehicles had passed since the snowstorm. The horses had to walk every step, floundering badly at times, and often stopping to rest. The damp snow clogged their feet, and the runners, and the climax of impediments was reached in the crushing of an iron stay running across the bottom of the cutter, by violent collision with a stone buried out of sight in the drift.

The passengers were thrown out, but fortunately escaped injury. The horses behaved well, and Wynant did not lose hold of the reins. Laying a fur robe over the back of the gentler horse of the two, he brushed the snow from Ailsie's cloak, and set her upon the improvised saddle, holding her in her place while with the other arm he guided the obedient animal. In this awkward style, with the broken sleigh dragging at the horses' heels, they tramped for a mile down a side-road to his brother Richard's house. Once there, the aspect of their fortunes was changed. They were warmly received, and the series of mischances that had cast them

upon the hospitality of their entertainers was declared to be a providential interposition in favor of the latter. The sleigh was repaired by night-fall at the nearest blacksmith's. The brothers enjoyed a family confabulation over their pipes in the evening, and Ailsie was merry with her favorite Rick and a host of younger cousins. All agreed that the sleighing would be much finer on the morrow and that they could, as Wynant phrased it, "slip down to the city in less than no time."

With the morning and the changed temperature arose serious deliberations as to the expediency of continuing the interrupted journey.

"I won't deny that I wanted to get on for my own sake," said the young uncle, coloring. "But you must believe me —all of you—when I declare that I should not have budged a foot in a month, if I had had the most distant fear of what has happened. Ailsie was in a suppressed agony of impatience to be off. She was too anxious as to the result of the discussions pro and con, to eat her breakfast, or to speak one uncalled-for word. When it was, at last, decided that we should wait an hour or two to see whether the extreme cold would not abate, she waylaid me in the hall, and begged, as for her life, that we might set out immediately.

"'I wouldn't miss Thanksgiving-day at home, for one thousand dollars,' she said. 'It drives me wild to think of their all sitting down to the table at dinner, with my empty chair staring them in the face. It will be almost as bad as if I were dead. You don't know how fast and firm I promised to be there, Uncle Wy! I said to Aunt Evy—"I shall be

home on Thanksgiving if I have to crawl all the way on my hands and knees." They can't help being uneasy, after that, if I don't come. Mamma will be miserable. She will think I'm sick or that something dreadful has happened. She knows I never break my word to her. And what's to hurt me? Uncle Richard and Aunt Sophy don't know how strong I am, and that I never mind the cold. It's perfectly glorious weather and we will have a jolly jaunt. Uncle Richard says himself that the sleighing is superb.'

"You know how she said it! Her fingers punishing one another, nervously, her eyes speaking as eloquently as her tongue, her face alive with such beseeching as would turn the heart of a nether mill-stone. There is no use talking about it! She could wheedle me out of my eyes if she chose to try the experiment. What she urged seemed reasonable too. I took a turn around the house to try the air for myself. It was very cold, but the sun was bright, and the wind gave no sign of rising higher. Indeed, it had gone down within the last hour.

"I returned to the sitting-room and told Sophy to get all the bottles of hot water and blankets she could spare and pack Ailsie up for the ride, for I meant to eat my Thanksgiving dinner in town. Of course there was a hubbub. There always is over Ailsie. Knowing this, I, maybe, paid less attention to it than I should have done. She was in tip-top spirits. You wouldn't have thought she could ever be cold again if you had seen her color and dancing eyes when we got her into the sleigh at half-past nine.

"Rick couldn't get over what he chose to look upon as her wilful desertion of him.

"'Better change your mind at the last gasp!' he said leaning on the side of the sleigh as I gathered up the reins. 'That town-fellow doesn't care half as much for you as I do.'

"'That shows how much mistaken a wise boy can be,' she answered saucily.

"'You won't see him to-day, at all events,' he went on. 'I have a presentiment that he will be off pleasuring with some other girl. He's a shifty chap, I know from his looks.'

"'Speak more respectfully of your elders and superiors, young man!' with immense dignity. 'Uncle Wy, we are losing time, listening to this *flummery!*'

"'You will be sorry for your hardness of heart when your blood begins to freeze,' was Rick's parting shot. 'I shall expect to see you back in less than an hour, crying with the cold—your lap full of tear-drops turned to ice.'

"'I'll die before I'll complain!' she called out, and we were off.

"The horses travelled finely, and driving kept me warmer, no doubt, than she could be, sitting perfectly still, and so bundled up that she couldn't have moved if she had tried. I proposed, several times, that we should stop and give up the trip for to-day, or get out to warm, but she would not consent to either plan. We did not talk much during the last ten miles. The wind was keen in our teeth and took away our breath when we opened our mouths. Now and then I asked if she were comfortable, and had the same answer,

always: 'I am doing very well, thank you!' The last time I spoke to her it was—'Don't worry about me, please, Uncle Wy!'

"How was I to guess that she was freezing, and hiding her suffering?"

Pressley still walked the floor with measured tread, but his hand went up to his mouth again and again, during the latter part of the narrative.

"The brave darling!" murmured Aunt Evy, betwixt smiles and tears. "There never was one of the name of more heroic spirit, Pressley. We must not scold her when she awakes—"

For the second time that day he turned sharply upon her.

"What do you take me for? Nobody but a brute could blame her. She would be faithful unto death, to her word, and to those whom she loves. Forgive my hasty judgment and words, Wynant. In your place I should have acted as you did. But let it be a lesson to us all for the future. No more pledges from, or unreasonable demands upon her affection and conscience!"

The early dinner was a success so far as cookery was concerned. Conversation was as palpably a failure. Mr. Darling carved in absolute silence. Aunt Evy and Wynant feigned to chat in a semi-confidential key. Nobody save Robby and the wee sister brought to the feast an appetite worthy of the name.

As for me, I was sick with a sort of nervous depression hitherto unknown to me even in my early hospital training.

What-might-have-been was a chill shadow in which I cowered, shivering and horror-stricken. Against my will, I rehearsed the scenes of the noon-tide. My first sight of the sleigh and its occupants, the terror winging the steps that outran even the father's frenzy. The awful weight of my darling's helplessness as I lifted her from the seat—a burden that pressed hope out of my bosom on the passage to the library; the livid complexion and the fixed gaze of the large eyes; the stilled pulse in the limp wrist; the gasp of pain that marked the revival of circulation in limbs and heart.

Would these haunt me all night? Would they follow me into the dreams of years to come, always to gloom me with the memory of the death that had so nearly been?

"Excuse me, if you please!" I said abruptly, when the dessert was set on.

Ailsie's empty chair did not stare me in the face as she had dreaded. Aunt Evy had privily ordered it to be removed, and the gap filled up by scattering the rest on that side farther apart. But her frost-white face floated between me and my plate. I could not get away from the imagination of the patient accents in which she must have said, with the mortal agony upon her—"Don't worry about me, Uncle Wy!"

And he, in selfish absorption in his love-fancies, drawing nearer to the woman he adored, with every stroke of his horse's hoofs upon the rock-hard snow, remarked neither patience nor pain.

"I'll die before I'll complain!" the dauntless little creature had engaged for herself. He had taken her at her word.

God might forgive him as he bent his handsome face toward the woman of gentle face and heart beside him, and talked of everyday topics in everyday tones, and sometimes with a smile! I never would. I did not want to judge him mercifully. He had showed no ruth to her tender years; had not been touched to pity and admiration by her fortitude. I must insult him by word or blow if I did not get me out of his presence. All were surprised when I arose with my blunt request. I must have looked something of the savageness I felt, for there was dismayed inquiry in Aunt Evy's eyes as she answered:

"Certainly, Barry, if you wish to leave us. Are you not well?"

"Quite well—but not hungry; I thought—" softening instinctively to her—"that I would go up and relieve Mrs. Darling. She will be faint. Moreover, I want to see how my patient is getting on."

"He hasn't eaten a bit of plum-pudding or pumpkin pie. And there's ice-cream coming!" uttered Robby, with gaping eyes and mouth.

Nobody smiled. I was not equal to so much as an attempt to seem amused.

Wynant started up. "I say! can't I go in your place? I'm not a doctor. But I ought to be doing something, or going somewhere for her, you know."

I put him aside with a gesture that was sufficiently expressive, for they did not hinder me, after that.

Which was all I asked of them.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### WITCH-HAZEL.

THERE was a window upon the landing of the stairs. I paused there for a moment. The pale-blue sky was yellow and hard at the lower edge, where a frozen-looking sun was taking leave of the world he had done so little to benefit, that day. The wind had fallen, but the cruel cold held fast to all it had made its own during the eight hours of its reign. The snow sparkled with millions of freshly-formed crystals; the icicles fringing eaves and gutters had not dripped from morning until evening.

"'Who can stand before His cold?'" I repeated, involuntarily.

View and quotation incensed me the more against the handsome scaramouch I had left down-stairs. The impatient muttering with which I turned from the casement had nothing to do with Holy Writ.

Mrs. Darling opened the chamber-door at my low tap, and when I had satisfied her, after brief inspection of the sleeper, that she was doing well, she yielded to my wish that she should leave me in charge.

At last, I could be quiet enough for thought and for the analyzation of feelings the might and tumult of which bewildered me. At last—I said it with exultation that trenched upon fierceness—I had my darling all to myself.

I took the chair vacated by her mother, and watched her in the fast-fading light of the winter afternoon. She lay in an attitude that was inexpressibly graceful, her face turned toward me, her hand under her cheek. The waves of dark hair swept away from her forehead, and the noble contour of head and features was thrown into relief by the white pillow. "Peerless," I had named her long ago. Seeing her thus; recalling her gifts of mind, heart and manner; dwelling, until my heart swelled to aching, upon her heroism, her fond faithful love, manifested so clearly, and for so long toward me—the truth unfolded itself to me. I deceived myself no longer—I never could delude my heart again with the belief that the affection I bore her was, as her father had styled it, "a farce." The event of the day and the agitation it had engendered within me—the anguish of suspense, the joy of relief, the indignation against the carelessness that had endangered the precious life, the welling tide of tenderness flowing toward her from the depths of my being, as I looked upon her now, living, safe, and in my loving keeping, these were revelations that needed no key.

Freely and minutely as I have related the rise and growth of our two years' intimacy, and the many circumstances that had combined to divide me from the associates I might

naturally have been expected to seek, and to bind me to my stanch little ally, there are those among my readers who will smile derisively when I say that, then and there, I knew beyond peradventure that, child or woman, this ten-year-old-girl was made for me and I for her, and that in the conviction, my whole soul went out to her in yearnings none other could satisfy—in allegiance never to be revoked. I bowed in the presence of my new hope, my new joy, my new life, as before the visible angel of blessing. I had stepped from the world of formulated duty and conventional ambition into one where love was law, where all I should hereafter be, or achieve, was for love's sake. I anticipated, with thrilling pulses, the fresh delight of watching the development of mind and character into a glory of perfected womanhood such as the world seldom sees; the certain and closer knitting of the bands of mutual affection. I thought how the dross and dregs of my character must pass away in the association with a nature so pure and fine as hers; how, as all that was base in me now stood rebuked before the holy light of her eyes, and whatever was worthy incited me to the attainment of such true nobility as might justify her belief in and love for me, the good work would the more surely go on until I became her soul-mate.

In all my dreams there was no foreshadowing of a day when she might shrink from me who had loved her always, and for refuge from the might of a devotion she had not fathomed because it had grown with her to strength and maturity, into the arms of a younger, and gayer lover. I do

not comprehend why the fear was not there. Perhaps because having been conscious of her growing nearness to me during each succeeding month and week, I could not admit the possibility of retrogression in a nature so true and stable.

Perhaps—

"Has she slept quietly?" The soft voice went through me like a galvanic shock.

I had not heard Mrs. Darling enter. I had not observed that the moon was shining in at the window, and that daylight had gone. I could trace the outline of the pure face upon the pillow, with its framing of dark hair. My eyes and thoughts were for that alone.

"Yes," I said. "Most peacefully."

The mother laid her hand upon my shoulder.

"It terrifies me to think what mistakes we might have made, how fatally misapplied restoratives, but for the seeming accident of your being here. We can never thank Our Heavenly Father as we should that you were with us to-day, and retained your self-command, when we lost ours. Never repay you for your great goodness to us and to her—our precious one!"

"It is nothing! less than nothing!" responded I hastily.

It irked me that I should be thanked for services due and joyfully rendered to my own.

"I question if even you appreciate how dear she is in our sight," resumed Mrs. Darling, without withdrawing her gaze from the pillowed head. "There has been something peculiarly lovely and interesting about her from babyhood. At

least, to us. You must wonder sometimes at our apparent favoritism."

This I could not bear.

"She is as dear to me," I said, curtly. "You do not believe this, now—" for she had turned her face to me in mild surprise. "You will, some day!"

Not even a vague perception of my meaning could have reached the mother's mind. Yet, her instincts touched to natural alarm by my vehement speech, she leaned toward the bed in silence, for an instant, the attitude of a bird cherishing or protecting her young.

I had been recklessly imprudent, but the endeavor to repair the mistake would only make it more palpable. I had resigned my chair to Mrs. Darling and now stood at her back, dreading yet longing for the next words.

She sat upright with a struggling sigh—then a little laugh.

"And you will know better some day, Barry. No friendship, however sincere and strong, can vie with parental love."

As if aroused by the last word, the recumbent figure stirred and spoke.

"Mamma dear! is that you?"

I had stepped back to the head of the bed, out of eye-range.

"I am not sick—am I?" was the next question.

"No, my love. You were so cold and tired when you got home, that we thought a long nap would be the best thing for you. You are quite comfortable—are you not?"

"Yes, only my hands and feet burn and ache. Not very badly, though. Mamma!" fastening eagerly upon her hand, and speaking in a low, awed tone. "I thought I should never get home alive. The cold was fearful! I kept praying, constantly, after Uncle Wy said we were half-way to town, that GOD would let me see you again, and help me not to complain. By the time we got in sight of the church-steeples, I felt the cold creeping up to my heart. I knew if it touched *that* I must die, and I tried hard to keep it warm by thinking of you all and loving you with all my might. GOD is very good!"

A pause neither of the listeners could end.

"Mamma!" spoke the sweet tones again. "Did I dream it, or was Mr. Barry here when we stopped at the door? I thought he brought me into the house. I couldn't speak. Something ailed my tongue. But it seemed to me that I heard his voice and saw his face."

"You did, dear." The poor mother strove in vain to answer steadily. "But for him, we should hardly have known what to do for you, you were so chilled and weak. Here he is now, as thankful as are the rest of us to see you so much better."

The darling held up her mouth for a kiss, retained my hand and motioned me to a seat on the side of the bed.

"I was certain you would dine with us on Thanksgiving Day!" she said in tranquil satisfaction. "I told Rick you never broke your word to me. I kept my promise, too. That was right, wasn't it?" struck by our significant silence.

"Mamma! I ought to have come, oughtn't I, when I had *promised?* Mr. Barry! was I wrong to beg Uncle Wy to bring me?"

"You are never wrong?" I pressed the hot hands to my lips. "But we will not trust you in the country in the winter again. You shall tell us about your visit, by-and-by. I am going to send papa up to you, now. He wanted to be called as soon as you were awake."

We had a lively evening, after all. Ailsie was dressed and brought down to the parlor in her father's arms, where she lay in high state, on a sofa, drawn into the centre of the room. We took tea about her, Robby and baby having theirs upon a broad cricket on the hearth-rug. Our queen's eyes were brilliant with enjoyment, taking in every feature of the novel grouping. Her laugh rang out—happy and mischievous by turns, as she talked with the children, or bandied repartee with her father and uncle. To me she was winning and loving beyond her wont, beckoning me to the place of honor at the back of her lounge, within reach of her hand, then inquiring, as an anxious second thought, if I would take cold there with her between me and the fire?

One and all, we waited upon her obsequiously. Her father fed her from his cup and plate; her mother tempted her with mention of dainties not upon the tea-board. Aunt Evy, looking somewhat worn by the agitations of the afternoon, sat in her sight with responsive smile and love-word whenever her "twin's" glance fell upon her.

Wynant went far to reinstate himself in my good graces by

his reception of the news that his niece was able to join the family circle, and his unbounded joy at seeing her again. His inamorata, who was not yet his betrothed, lived in the next street, and was presumably at home, since she knew of his intention to dine at his brother's on Thanksgiving Day. Yet he lingered with us until nearly nine o'clock, and it really appeared doubtful whether he would have gone then, but for Aunt Evy's direct advice that he should pay his respects and offer the compliments of the season to the expectant fair one.

"You are certain, Ailsie, woman, that you haven't the tiniest bit of a grudge laid up against me in some back corner of your blessed little heart?" he returned to the parlor to say after putting on his overcoat.

Ailsie showed her white teeth in a merry smile.

"You are behind the times, Uncle Wy. There are no back corners in my well-regulated young lady's heart. It's all front windows, plate-glass, and gas-fixtures inside, so that you can see clear through. But I see what you are at. You're trying to hint me into saying that I oughtn't to have brought your delicate self across the country in such weather. It's likely somebody else will think so, too. Tell her it was entirely my fault. That you begged and prayed me to let you stay at your brother's where you were enjoying yourself, but I forced you to come, whether you would or not. That's a nice beginning for your evening's talk. I have heard gentlemen say it was half the battle to get the conversation handsomely started."

"I wish—" said Wynant threateningly, when the laugh at his expense had subsided—"that I had upset you in a dozen snow-drifts instead of one. Let me but get you in a sleigh once more!"

"I'd rather be where I am!" remarked Ailsie, to me, nestling down among her cushions, with a sigh of exquisite comfortableness, as a puff of cold air penetrated to the warm parlor from the front door, opened by the departing suitor. "This is deliciously snug and lovely. It is almost worth while to be half-frozen, now and then, to learn how to enjoy home and big fires, and people taking tea sociably about one's lazy self. Take it altogether, I am not sorry I went to grandpa's. I had a delightful visit. I never saw the country in winter before. I like it. The gray rocks and brown fields; the straight solemn trees, with, may be, three or four bunches of ragged leaves hanging on the branches, and the blackish hemlocks and rusty, obstinate-looking cedars were not exactly beautiful, of course. But they were interesting. Then the wind at night was grand! You might have thought yourself at the sea-shore in a storm, as you lay awake, listening to it in the grove behind the house. But the most curious thing was to hear the river groan all night long. You needn't laugh, Mamma! It really did! It was tight-frozen, and you could hear the groan begin away up as far as the bridge, and run all the way down, until, I suppose, it moaned itself out."

"Whales?" suggested round-eyed Robby, squeezing between his mother and aunt to get near the story-teller.

Ailsie smoothed his hair affectionately, laughing at what she considered a bright idea of her small brother's.

"No, dear! But it sounded very alive! I was quite vexed when grandpa told me it was wind under the ice that made it. It was the queerest noise, Aunt Evy! It made shivers run through me. I wouldn't think about the air bubbling under the ice and trying to get out, after I went to bed. It was nice and horrible to imagine that it was the poor water-spirits moaning in their prison for the air and sunshine. It reminded me of Ariel shut up in the tree. When his groans made the wolves howl, you know."

"In the name of reason," said Mr. Darling, glancing from one to another with a frown of perplexity, half earnest, half comic. "Are you all in a conspiracy to crack this child's brain? What business has she to know anything about Ariel, or even that such a man as Shakspeare ever lived?"

"That is a question for you to answer," returned Miss Marr, quietly. "She made acquaintance with him in your library. Under your eye, she tells me."

"You said I might look at the book, papa," explained Ailsie. "The heavy Shakspeare with so many pictures in it."

"Which pictures were the attraction, as I supposed," said Mr. Darling, sighing like one beyond his depth. "That a monkey like you would sit curled up in the corner of a sofa, poring, half the evening, over anything else in the volume, never entered my head. And, pray, Miss Darling, what have you read in my heavy Shakspeare besides 'The Tempest?'".

"Midsummer Night's Dream, papa. And Romeo and Juliet. And the Comedy of Errors. Hamlet I began, but let go when I got to the ghost. I can't endure scary stories. Oh! and Julius Cæsar."

"In spite of dead Cæsar's ghost!" interposed her father, "Go on!"

"That is about all, papa. Except that I dipped into Richard Third."

"And waded a short distance into Henry Fifth, with a sprinkle of each of the other kings?"

"Not yet!" with a sparkle of arch defiance. Then, in serious simplicity: "You don't really object, papa? I thought all wise scholars liked to read Shakspeare."

"It is too early for my lady-bird to be a wise scholar." The father put back the hair from her forehead, smiling half-mournfully. "Mother Goose would be safer reading for you yet awhile."

"There are as silly things in Shakspeare as in Mother Goose," affirmed Ailsie, stoutly. "Just hear this!

'You spotted snakes with double tongue,
Thorny hedge-hogs, be not seen;
Newts and blind-worms, do no wrong,
Come not near our fairy queen.
Philomel with melody
Sing in our sweet lullaby,
Lulla, lulla, lullaby; lulla, lulla, lullaby.'

There's just as much poetry in—

'London Bridge is broken down,
Dance light, my lady gay.'

And as for it's being a fairies' song and a lullaby—it was enough to keep Titania awake all night to hear of so many crawly creatures—when she was going to sleep on the ground, too!"

Encouraged by the unusually active part his sister was taking in the general conversation, Robby put in his oar:

"Mother Goose is splendid, *I* think. All but Old Mother Morey. That is a cheat."

"I don't know about that," said Ailsie, eagerly. "There's a deal to be got out of her. So much to make up stories about. There used to be a picture of her in my Mother Goose—the first one I ever had. An old lady with a cap with a wide border, and a blue apron on, sitting in an arm-chair. Her brother was in another chair on the other side of the house-door. He was a meek, bald little man with a stick in his hand, and round shoulders. It always seemed to me that she must have hen-pecked him. The story may have been about that. Or, she was a very respectable old lady, and he wasn't. You could make-believe no end of things about them."

"That is a novel notion to me—that anything could be made out of Mother Morey," said Mrs. Darling. "Like Robby, I have always regarded her as a cheat, and her brother as another of the same sort."

Ailsie colored quickly and diffidently.

"It's all make-believe, of course, mamma," she said, deprecatingly. "But it does seem as if there are lots of fun and good times in the world as well as in books, if people

would take the trouble to hunt them up. Beautiful and curious things, too!"

"Witch-hazel!" said Aunt Evy, aside.

Ailsie caught the words, but not the meaning, and subsided into studious silence. She had a way of going into retirement with a new idea, as a squirrel carries off a nut to his hole to pick out the meat undisturbed.

By-and-by, taking advantage of a brisk discussion between her father, mother, and aunt, relative to some date of family history, she appealed softly to me:

"Isn't it a hazel-rod they carry to show where water is under the ground?"

"Yes. And hid treasure. That is the superstition."

"Then I don't understand what Aunt Evy meant. Do you?"

I smiled. "I think I do."

"Will you tell me?"

"Yes."

"When?"

I stooped to say it in her ear:

"In eight years from to-night, Ailsie. Do not forget to ask me, then!"

## CHAPTER XIX.

### MY ORIOLE.

THREE-quarters of the first of the eight years had gone. It was the first week of September. The Darlings had been at Brightwood since the middle of June, and I had visited them but twice; once on the glorious Fourth, and again for one restful Sabbath in August. But the wearisome lane had turned at last. I was to have a fortnight's vacation from sick-beds and city streets, every day of which I designed to spend with my best friends.

This time they knew of my coming. At the half-mile bend that led the highroad in the opposite direction from Brightwood, a curricle was waiting for me in the shade of an oak, —a low-hung, cozy conveyance, with a sober roadster in the shafts, and seated within, holding the reins, with neither driver nor groom in sight, was Ailsie.

I could sketch her now, as she appeared to me at the sudden whirl of the stage out of a wooded piece of road into the cleared plain. The bloom of her pink lawn dress and ribbons of the same hue on her broad-brimmed "flat," made a

pretty dash of color in the monotone of September green. The wavering lights piercing the tree-boughs dappled her skirts and hat. And the face under the straw brim was the rarest bit of moulding and tinting my eyes had rested upon since she blessed them last. She waved me no welcome. Her countenance did not change from its grave serenity. Touching her horse lightly with the whip, she drove forward when the coach moved off—not before—meeting me halfway between the oak and the public road. The coach was full, inside and out, and I comprehended that she would not be made a spectacle of, or have our re-union commented upon by coarse or indifferent spectators. The color rose to her cheek; the lips unbent gladly in giving me her hand over the side of the curricle. Her eyes said a world of sweet and nameless things; were lustrous with proud satisfaction; completeness of joy that needed not the endorsement of lip-language.

"You were good to come for me, *Chêrie*," I said stepping into my place.

"I would not have let anybody else come," she rejoined, brightly. "I learned to drive on purpose. And kept it for a surprise for you. Now, you should say that you *are* surprised."

"Never more in my life!" I affirmed. "I shall expect to see you an Amazon yet. Your Arab steed is quite safe —is he?"

"He isn't a particle steed-y!" flicking him with the lash to prove his imperturbability. "He is only very plain Jack.

Born and bred to the plough except when he went to church on Sunday. But for the looks of the thing we might as well drive an old cow. Safe! That's no word for his stupidity. I don't believe he ever threw his heels up and his head down even when he was a colt. He only stood on the sunny side of the fence with a straw in his mouth, all day long."

He went as fast as I cared to have him, at present. The road was a tolerably smooth track, up-hill most of the way; an evergreen wood on one side, chestnuts and oaks on the other. Little brooks—all silver and foam—leaped down the bank and ran laughing across the road to throw themselves down the steeper headland of the lake. The familiar smell of resinous boughs; the fresh air from the water; the restless play of the shadows and sunbeams upon green hillsides; the beautiful glooms of bosky gorges leading upward from the road into the mountains,—brought back Aunt Evy's jest about the garden of Eden. As we drove along I began to chant:

"O Paradise! O Paradise!
Who doth not crave for rest?
Who would not seek the happy land
Where they that love are blest?
Where loyal hearts and true
Stand ever in the light—"

"That is Heaven!" said Ailsie, when she had listened thus far.

"Didn't you write to me that Brightwood was heaven upon

earth? It is lovelier than ever, Ailsie! I have dreamed of it every night—and day—for a week past."

"You are going to give us your whole vacation—aren't you?" she asked, solicitously. "The entire fortnight?"

"Every day of it, *Chêrie!* If you will let me stay. I am very sure at this minute, that I shall never go away. It will always be September and afternoon, and you and I are to drive slowly on under the sweet-smelling trees, talking of what pleases us and doesn't concern other people. That is my idea of a vacation."

"You wouldn't object to Jack's going a *little* faster?"

"Jack is perfect—in his way, my dear! I am in the humor for saying—'Blessed be idleness! Long live sloth!' Don't go in!" seeing that our lively "steed" slackened his already moderate speed in nearing the Brightwood gate. "The sun is more than an hour high. Are you too tired to make the turn of the lake?"

"No—" hesitating. "Not at all tired. I should like it dearly. Ah! there is Robby!" beckoning joyfully. "Robby, dear! will you run to the house and tell mamma that I have gone to ride with Mr. Barry and that we shall be home in good time for tea? You see—" she added, when we had driven off—"I was afraid she might be uneasy at my staying out so long, if she supposed I had only gone to the corner to meet the stage."

"Thoughtful little woman!" I said, in genuine admiration.

The sudden blush Aunt Evy had described as "one of her tricks," warmed her face.

"You would not say that if you knew! That is Aunt Evy's way, not mine—thinking of other people first. I feel dreadfully about it, sometimes, when I forget. When, for instance, I sit still with my book in a rocking-chair and let mamma take one that isn't so pleasant. Or, let her wait on herself when she wants something out of another room, or maybe up-stairs. Aunt Evy says I'll get over it when I am older. That young people are more thoughtless than selfish. That she has nothing to do but lie still and think how she can help others. I *wish* one could be good without having to suffer beforehand. Aunt Evy says Pain is GOD's most skilful teacher. I was born a coward. I'm terribly afraid of pain!"

"So are all who have sound, healthy bodies. The very fulness of life makes the idea of suffering 'terrible.' Don't distress yourself with the notion that it is cowardly. It would be unnatural if you liked to think of the possibility that the discipline of sorrow and sickness may be yours some day."

We drove so slowly that Jack must have enjoyed the jaunt almost as much as ourselves. But we talked very fast, each having much to tell. It is difficult to believe now, remembering her age, that she hearkened with intelligent sympathy to details of professional struggles, ordeals and successes; that she was the solitary confidante of the fact that I was the author of certain articles upon sanitary precautions in architecture, street-building, and in the daily life of the household, that were exciting some talk in the metropolis, or that

I had brought them, with the editorial remarks thereupon, for her private reading.

"You are sure you have them all in your valise?" she queried, earnestly. "And you are really willing to trust them with me? I will be very careful not to tear the least slip.

"It makes me feel very happy," she resumed, blushing again, "to know that you are getting to be a distinguished man. And that you care for silly me as much as ever. But it is a great puzzle that you do."

"You don't know what nonsense you are talking, dear. I am not 'distinguished.' The probability is that I never shall be. And nothing—nothing, Ailsie, in life or in death, can ever change my love for you. Promise that you will never doubt this!"

My vehemence neither agitated nor surprised her.

"I always believe what you say," she replied, quietly. "I could not endure to think that you *could* stop loving me. But it is very good in you, all the same."

I had talked to her in our drive as to a woman. It was the child who knocked at my door next morning to call out that she was "going to feed the chickens in ten minutes, and I must hurry down, if I wanted to see them in their morning glory."

A frolicsome child, in the wild spirits that never bless full-grown human beings before breakfast, she danced along the path leading to the barn and poultry-yard, swinging her basket of shelled corn around her head so dexterously as not to spill a grain, brimful of mimicry and badinage.

"Honor bright, now, doctor—" she reserved the title for her teazing moods. At other seasons I was still her "Mr. Barry"—"Honor bright, now! Did you ever come so near seeing the sun rise before?"

"Not that I remember. But I have seen it set a thousand times and more."

"And you are so ignorant of 'Nature's grand phenomen*ay*' as to imagine that you have only to read a sunset backward, and you have a sunrise? That's like

'a citizen
Of credit and renown,'

who fancies there's nothing out of town worth seeing or hearing about. Why, the dewdrops and the cobwebs are a sight in themselves, if you are up in the morning early."

She sang as she waltzed:

"Now summer dews are on the grass,
Hanging pure and pearly,
And morning moments quickly pass,
Up in the morning early!"

An indescribable clamor drowned her voice. From grove, barn-yard, and lawn scampered and flew toward us a feathered throng,—turkeys, ducks, Guinea-fowls, chickens, in all stages of development, wide-mouthed in welcome or greed, and within the pale of the poultry-yard proper arose a corresponding din.

Ailsie laughed heartily when I put both hands to my ears.

"Don't you like it?" having quieted her courtiers measurably by bountiful handfuls from her basket. "It is better than a brass band when your ear is educated to it."

"Those wretches certainly have brazen throats!" replied I, pointing to some Guinea-fowls whose metallic "pot-rack! pot-rack!" threatened to split my tympanum.

"I am not over-fond of them, myself—" tossing extra rations in their direction to purchase a moment's peace. "Aunt Evy says they are the 'speckled Arabs of the poultry-yard.' But they are not like Arabs in one thing; they don't care a mite more for you when they've eaten your bread and salt—or corn and oats, which amounts to the same thing—all summer long, than if you were their worst enemy. They would run for their lives if I were to go a step nearer to them. While my chickens, turkeys, and ducks *trust* me. Just see!"

She stooped in the midst of the noisy crowd, and held out her hand full of corn. In a second it was empty, and a dozen were scrambling to peck at her fingers, two or three young chickens jumped on her lap, and one saucy cockerel to her shoulder. She turned her face from them to laugh up into mine—the embodiment of health and innocent delight.

In wholesomeness and vigor she resembled the typical English child, rather than the more meagre American nursling one encounters in country strolls as often as in city promenades. "Hale," was the word that offered itself to me as most happily descriptive of her at that instant. Her clear brown skin was rosy with the regular pulse of fresh blood untainted in fount or flow. Lung, muscle, and brain,

she was faultlessly sound. The mind, which was her richest dower, did not owe its rapid expansion to unhealthy heats.

Stepping aside to wait for her, I uncovered my head to the sweet morning air. I was thanking Him who had made her, that she lived, and praying, as I had never asked for other blessings, that the fond sense of ownership with which I regarded her, might not prove the vainest, as it had been the fairest of illusions.

By the time the rest were ready for breakfast, we had been to the upper pasture to look at the "fairy lace" draping every weed and bearded blade of grass, and binding the gaunt mullein-stalks in telegraphic communication; had fed the rabbits, and decided upon the comparative beauty of white, tawny, and dappled; had admired the pretty audacity of the half-domesticated squirrels that chattered at us from boughs I could almost have touched with my hand,—and had a row upon the lake in the "Midget,"—a dainty shell of a boat, so named by her father, out of compliment to his best-loved child. She was very proud of the craft, and of her skill in rowing, taking me up to "Lily Island" above the bridge and back, in time that proved her to be a capital oarswoman. I was permitted to steer, but not to touch an oar, and, reassured that she was not in danger of over-exerting herself by seeing the ease with which she handled her namesake, I gave myself up to the pleasure of watching the supple, rounded wrists that pulled so even and strong a stroke, and the witching face, more radiant than the early sunlight.

"Lilies and roses!" said Mr. Darling, glancing from the

central ornament of the breakfast-table—a bowl of exquisite lilies, which were the spoils of our voyage—to his daughter's cheeks. "The trophies of your triumph over 'dull sloth and a drowsy bed!' At your age, young people, I thought them worth rising for. Now—

> 'I love an early doze, mother,
> I love an early doze.'"

"At your age!" It might have been a slip of the tongue, or a good-natured endeavor to say something agreeable to me. Most likely it was a careless form of words that meant less than nothing. But the phrase sent a tingle through me. The fifteen years' seniority, that I was apt to think of with apprehension, sometimes with dismay, as a possible or probable gulf that might appear to Ailsie or her natural guardians just cause for separating us eventually, was evidently a matter of no consequence in her father's estimation. If anything were needed to make the sunshine clearer, the air more invigorating, and the prospect of a whole fortnight in my present Paradise more transporting, the random remark supplied it. To heighten the pleasing effect of the speech, nobody smiled, or seemed aware of anything incongruous in the conjunction of "us young people." My footing as Ailsie's peculiar property was assumed and granted, without criticism, —much less, demur.

She settled the matter by informing me, after breakfast, that her daily tasks of reading and needlework were to be intermitted during my stay at Brightwood.

"My practising I must keep up, of course," she observed. "If you will excuse me, I'll get that off my mind, forthwith."

"Run away, then, Mrs. Bagnet, and attend to the greens," said her aunt. "The doctor must content himself with the society of a grandmother and a grand-aunt. You know that I have a namesake in Cincinnati—don't you?"

"Ailsie wrote that she was promoted to the dignity of auntship," returned I, blowing a blue ring from the end of the cigar Ailsie had lighted before going to the piano.

The ladies were seated in Boston rockers, broad and low, on the piazza fronting the lake; I, upon the steps. It was a divine morning, and the sun which had kissed the dew off the lawn would not reach our shade until near noon. The honeysuckles on the pillars and underrunning the eaves of the porch were in their second blossoming. A brood of pigeons with eyes like carbuncles, hoods and breasts of chameleon silk, strutted and cooed on the gravel walk. Remembering the scorching sidewalks with their thinned stream of passengers, and the teeming hospital with its sickening sights and sounds, I luxuriated in my lazy content. Fourteen days seemed a lifetime of bliss when one took into account that this was early in the forenoon of the first.

"She is an inveterate newsmonger," said Mrs. Darling, "if we may judge from your reception of our morsels of family and neighborhood gossip. 'So Ailsie wrote' or 'Ailsie mentioned that,' are stereotyped replies—patented wet blankets."

"She is a pearl of a correspondent," I answered; "deal-

ing, as yet, more with fact than with sentiment. And having announced her fact, she lets it alone—drops it entirely, dusts her fingers delicately and proceeds to the next item. She wastes neither time nor words."

There was pleasure in the consciousness that I had more intimate knowledge than the loving mother and aunt, of her habits of thought and expression.

"And then it is 'off her mind!'" smiled Miss Marr. "You will observe how systematic she has grown; how conscientious as to the season, no less than the manner in which duty is discharged. Recreation does not deserve the name in her regard, while the shadow of an unperformed task rests upon her. She has heard of Mrs. Bagnet's greens until she must be sick of their odor."

The conversation strayed with that, and my attention also. From the neighboring parlor came the sound of a simple theme so well played that I could not help listening, knowing who the performer was. The fingering was not difficult, or the score abstruse. Hands less deft than the slender, sunburned ones now on the keys could have managed these. But the child had seized upon the soul of the composition and interpreted it audibly. By shifting my position to the farther end of the steps I obtained a view of the unconscious performer. Light from the long casement flowed over her and the music-sheets set up for her study. She had a partiality for all shades of gold-color, from orange to palest amber, and all became her. Especially did she affect in this summer weather, a morning costume of buff muslin or

French chintz, and a coquettish black silk apron with pockets and, what were known then as *bretelles*, passing over the shoulders. A white ruffle finished the dress at the throat; a buff ribbon tied back her hair.

"Barry!" called Aunt Evy, in pretended petulance. "Do you know that Mrs. Darling has spoken to you twice without receiving a symptom of a reply? Are your wits drowsing or sky-larking?"

"I am studying the natural habits and appearance of the oriole," returned I, apologetically. "If Mrs. Darling will step this way she will pardon me."

She smiled forgiveness without change of place.

"Her father calls her his canary bird when she wears that dress, but I like your simile better."

"A canary is too tame,—too much the creature of training and circumstance," I said. "His song is always the same, too. There is so little variety in the shrill warble that one soon tires of it. The oriole—wild, bright, graceful,—singing for very gladness the song nature and love have taught—that is more like Ailsie!"

There was nothing peculiar in my accent or manner—at least, so I thought—but Miss Marr turned to me with a strange, startled expression, as of one rudely shaken from slumber;—unclosed her lips to question or exclaim,—but remained silent.

So silently abstracted that her sister seemed to weary of our society after a while, and left us to dream out our respective visions or to compare confidences as we might choose.

I felt what was coming, and contemplated the prospect with the serenity of a mind long since made up,—committed to one line of action,—" 'Though father and mither and a' should go mad."

In the audacity of seasoned resolve and the impertinence of present happiness, I quoted the line aloud before Miss Marr had her catechism in train:

"' Though father and mither and a' should go mad!'

That's the plain Scotch of it, Aunt Evy—more stubborn than English! The oriole will sing in my bower, in the fulness of time. So the fates have decreed."

"So says a boy's wilful fancy!" was the rejoinder. "Some things are too absurd for serious argument or opposition, Barry. There will be time for a dozen heart-affairs on your part, before she begins to think of being a woman. And she will have her say before the matter can be decided so definitely as you imagine. A 'say' that may not be what you expect."

"All the same, she will be mine!" I said, imperturbably. "Will come to and with me, of her own will. It is written in our stars, hers and mine."

The sweet pale face was troubled. Rising from her chair, Aunt Evy crossed over to me and sat down upon the step, laid her hand upon my knee.

"Don't jest about this! It seems foolish to discuss the subject seriously, but I cannot endure the suspicion of ridicule where she and her happiness are concerned."

"Jest!" more nearly angry with her than I would have believed possible, a moment before. "How do you expect *me* to endure the imputation of trifling with that which is more sacred in my thoughts and hopes than aught else upon earth? I thought *you* knew me better than that!"

"I know what you are now. I believe, too, that yours is a nature that will not lightly change. But she is our baby, Barry! Have you counted over the years that must pass before you can so much as tell her what she is to you—always provided that your own feelings, and views, do not alter?"

"I am to wait seven years and a quarter, before I say a word," I answered, cheerfully. "Jacob served almost twice that time, for a woman who was not one hundredth part as worthy of life-long devotion, and they 'seemed but a few days unto him for the love that he bore her.' It has been revealed to me that this great glory is to crown my existence. Call me irrational, and puerile, if you like. I own that some things cannot be assailed by argument, or upset. But do not make me miserable now, by intimations that you will not entrust your bright bird to my keeping when her wings are plumed for flight from the parent nest. I will guard her faithfully, cherish her tenderly."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"She is as sensitive as bright, Barry! I tremble when I picture her as exposed to the chill airs and unfriendly buffets of a world that bears most hardly upon the finest spirits. Her home has been a warm and sheltered retreat."

"Give her to me!" I entreated. "To me who have known and studied her so long. My breast shall be her shield from rude winds, and ruder blows. You cannot doubt my earnestness, or my constancy! This is not a whim but something that has rooted itself in the very core of my being. I am not a boy, Aunt Evy! Nor has mine been a boy's career for four years past. I understand to what I am pledging myself—what possible prejudices and more plausible reasonings I am engaging to overcome. For overcome them I shall in the end. I shall prove that I have kept myself young for Ailsie's sake, and pure that I might never have to hang my head in shame at thought of the crystal purity of her soul. I told you, years ago, that she was my evangel. You cannot know, because I cannot put into words, all that she has been to me since of example and stimulus, of warning from the evil, and winning toward the good. You have called her your baby, but the woman looks out of those marvellous eyes. Let her love me, still, without bashful tremor until I dare teach her what love is, and what love I have felt for her. Trust to my honor not to forestall the declaration by a day."

I pleaded as for life and all its goods. A horrible dread had overtaken me. What if this woman, whose will was law in everything pertaining to the management of her "twin," should deem the continuance of my intimacy with her charge inadvisable, now that she had listened to my confession? if, with her knowledge of human nature, and the world, she should adjudge it wise and kind to separate us for per-

haps a term of years, lest Ailsie should be unduly influenced to favor my suit by reason of her youth, and in the belief that I would put away what Miss Marr considered a preposterous fancy, as I gained in experience and age?

Separation from Ailsie! I felt the blood drain back to my heart and stagnate there at the thought; wished heartily that I had never been betrayed by the heedlessness of happiness into the indiscretion of speaking openly of that which I had guarded so jealously and long. Why could not I have remained content with the idyl that stood with me for all I knew of poetry, beauty, romance, home, love—I had almost said, heaven—without perilling it by weak cravings for sympathy and confirmation of my hopes? Since my love-story was unlike any other ever told or written, why must I tamper with its delicate loveliness by attempting to narrate it, even to one so tender of heart and subtle of comprehension as was she who sat beside me, the troubled look deepening, instead of passing from her eyes? Was it possible for any third person to enter into the feeling I had for my little love? Rarefied flame; flower-scent; the drop of light that throbs, but never flickers in the diamond's heart; the hearing and the thought of sweet music—were similitudes that presented themselves to be rejected as like, but not exact, as I sought to define it to myself. Like a father's fondness in watchful protection of her feebleness; like a mother's love in fostering care of growing mind and body; and intertwined with and intensifying these, the lover's pride and rapturous anticipations of the blossom-time of this exquisite bud.

"I cannot sum it up to my own satisfaction!" I broke out, impatiently. "How can I expect you to understand how much this is to me—how utterly wrecked I shall be if you take it from me, even for awhile?"

"As if I could!" smiling, but not yet brightly. "As if I *would* if I could! But I was unprepared, Barry, and you have frightened me somewhat. Your vehemence could not but seem incongruous—"

She glanced over her shoulder at the figure sitting in the flood of sunlight in the room beyond, unconscious of our observation, intent upon getting the hour's practice "off her mind."

"If she were an ordinary child, or if our intercourse had been less close and dear to both, you might use that word. I have known and studied her through and through. I have never loved another creature with one thousandth part of the devotion I have lavished upon her. And since last Thanksgiving Day I have understood and meant all I have said and more," I went on, taking courage from my companion's evident wavering. "Be merciful, Aunt Evy! And reasonable. You have not forgotten your own young days. Put yourself in my place—"

"Don't say *that!* For heaven's sake, don't put it in that way!"

Her dress was no whiter than her face. Her breath came hard; her hands fluttered as if grasping in the air for invisible support.

"You don't know—you have never heard—I am not superstitious—but don't ask me to imagine—"

I had seen men—and women—struggle for composure. I had never witnessed a battle for it until this frail creature fought for the semblance of self-command before me. The veins in her temples stood out like dark cords; every muscle of face and hands was tense; the lips were crushed into a straight line of pain.

"Forgive me, and say no more!" I began, and was silenced by a gesture.

Ailsie had returned to the pensive "Thought" with which she had begun her practising—very weird and mournful in the silence that lay between us two, without. She had played it quite through when Miss Marr spoke again:

"I have not mentioned his name in fifteen years—since his mother died—except to Ailsie. She has seen his likeness, and we talk of him in the Sabbath twilights. She would not speak of him, even to you, for she understands. As no other child would. You are right there. He died to save my life. I was riding alone in the country and the horse ran away, directly down the mountain. Barry was out gunning— (You never guessed why I liked your name so well? It was *his*, and until I met you, I had never known another who bore it.) He chanced to be crossing the road, and saw me coming. There was a precipice just beyond the turn at which he took his stand. He caught the bridle and struggled with the horse, calling to me to throw myself off, and clear of the saddle. I obeyed. As I touched the ground, the horse leaped forward. They went over the cliff together. His arm was wound in the bridle to gain a firmer

hold. That he might the more surely save *me!* He lived a day and a night. He said—in the intervals of such suffering as drove me wild to see—that he was thankful he was near at hand—that his had been the privilege of rescuing me. *I* have never been thankful for it. But I thought I was bearing it better as time is bringing nearer the day of our reunion. You took me by surprise by speaking as you did. You need not fear lest I shall be skeptical as to the strength and duration of the one love of a lifetime.

"Our Father who knows our frame and remembers that we are dust—the only Friend who is both all-wise, and all-pitiful—bless you, and in His own good time (not yours, Barry! remember that!) give you the love of my precious child! The thought of seeing her a woman grown—the fancy that I might in some way guard her happiness, has gone further than anything else to reconcile me to the prolonged separation from *my* Barry. Should I not live to do this, there will be comfort in the remembrance of what you have said, to-day; that the dear work will be left for you to complete."

She arose, waved me back when I would have offered my arm, and walked feebly into the house.

The warmed honeysuckle-bells yielded spicier incense to the pleasant wandering airs. The pigeons cooed and pouted in their sunny promenade. Ailsie played on perseveringly, her hour not being up.

## CHAPTER XX.

### IN THE WOODS.

THE last day but one of my vacation was devoted to a repeatedly postponed expedition, in quest of woodcock, which were reported to be plentiful and not over-shy in the marshy preserves on the other side of the mountain-ridge. There were moist glens over there and brush-fringed quagmires, known familiarly to Wynant, who was an enthusiastic sportsman and never averse to the display of a "capital shot" to an appreciative looker-on.

Between his determination that I should accompany him in an all-day tramp, and my own lurking liking for a good gun and dog, with a tolerable chance of filling my game-bag, the matter was settled and the programme carried out even to the early breakfast and the trudge through the fields before the "fairy lace" lost a row of the seed-pearls begemming it.

Ailsie went with us to the fence dividing the road from the upper meadow: mounted a rock, and stood watching us while we crossed the open ground to the forest. At the

thither fence we looked back. The buff-and-black uniform was plainly discernible at this distance, and the wave of her hand responsive to the toss of our hats. Then we plunged into wilderness and solitude save for the companionship of each other, and the excellent retriever we had brought along. The exception of the latter is simple justice.

"Did you ever see anything handsomer?" asked Wynant, as the fine fellow "pointed" a covey of quails before we had gone a quarter of a mile into the woods. "He can do anything but speak in human language; knows more than most Christian bipeds ever learn."

"He doesn't understand that the law isn't up for quail-shooting until November," said I. "More's the pity for us that it isn't! It is hard on a gunner who gets out but once a year not to be allowed a crack at such a flight of brown-coats as that."

I raised my gun in silent aim at the tempting flock whirring away, ahead of us.

"Frank is as wise as the quails, at any rate," rejoined his master. "They ought to know they are in no danger."

The report of two shots fired in quick succession in the direction taken by the birds gave the lie to his words. With the sportsman's instincts in hot revolt, he pushed through the bushes, in quest of the violator of the law we had respected at such cost of our inclination, whistling, as he went, to recall Frank, who had dashed off to look up the fallen game, at sound of the gun. The offender stood on

the verge of a stubble-field, not a dozen yards away, and his own dog was in the act of delivering up a quail, still fluttering, at his feet.

"You may not be aware that you have rendered yourself liable to prosecution and fine by shooting quail at this season," began Wynant, temperately enough. "I could inform against you, and receive a share of the fine for so doing, but—"

The other interrupted him by a volley of oaths, directed first at the laws, secondly, and more viciously, at Wynant, whom he addressed by name and stigmatized as a "bloody aristocrat," with a variety of other less complimentary titles. Young Darling bore the attack with better temper than I should have expected.

"I did not recognize you when I first spoke," he said. "I know now who you are, and that this is not your only offence of this kind. You were warned off the Brightwood fields last month by my brother's farmer, for firing into a covey of half-grown partridges. I shall enter a complaint against you at the next term of court, for wilful and repeated violation of the game laws of this State. It is pot-hunters and loafers like you who are ruining our hunting in this part of the country, destroying the birds before they are grown, and making those you don't kill, so wild there is no such thing as getting near to them when the season comes. These are my brother's—Pressley Darling's—grounds, and I order you to take yourself and your dog out of them. You mean to carry those quails home to your uncle, to be cooked, I suppose.

Say to him for me that he becomes your accomplice if he receives them."

"I shan't budge 'till I'm good and ready!" blustered the poacher, with another broadside of profanity.

"'Good' you will never be. 'Ready' you are now, or I'll put you out into the road, willy-nilly!" said Wynant, drawing up his athletic form, and so evidently meaning what he said that the loafer called in his dog, and skulked off sulkily, growling hoarse curses at every step.

"A load of buck-shot in his filthy carcass wouldn't be a bad investment," remarked Wynant, contemptuously. "You know who the vagabond is, I suppose? Gaskin's nephew. Don't you remember the brazen calf of Ailsie's lecture upon the 'Life and Character of Moses?' laughing at the recollection. "His father died last year, and this valuable citizen came back on his affectionate uncle for home and provender. Ezra put him on the farm, at the tail of a plough, and Mrs. Ezra hammered away at him when he was in the house to get 'chores' out of him. But a lazier, tipsier dog never emigrated from city to country, and that is saying much. His relatives cannot actually disown him, or send him to the poor-house, but he is a rankling thorn in the side of the frugal respectable pair. He will *not* work, and he will drink! The best disposition they could make of him would be to lock him up in the garret for a week, with a tapped barrel of Jersey lightning. That might finish him. Although it is a tough job killing off that kind. If the truth were known, we should learn that he slept under somebody's haystack last

night. That is the reason he is abroad so early. As like as not, he was rooted out of his bed by the other pigs."

I gave a parting glance at the miserable object disappearing among the trees. An overgrown, hulking boy, ruined, soul and body, at eighteen. "Outcast," stamped upon every lineament of his dirt-seamed visage, unshorn of the reddish down of incipient manhood, and in every rent of his shabby clothes. His unkempt hair, carroty red, protruded through the gaps in his slouched hat, and hung in a mat, down to his eyes, bloodshot and ugly as any bull-dog's. Mine had never rested upon a more unsightly figure or face. In the clean, pure-scented country he was abominable beyond comparison. I thought in genuine compassion, of the bustling housewife, once my landlady; of her fidgety neatness at home, and her respect for the opinions of the community that was all the world she had ever known. The foul sot must be a grotesque feature amid the shining cleanliness of the farm kitchen, where the grand-dame used to rattle all movable properties in her rainy-day "pottering."

How long ago it seemed! and how uncertain the identity of the sickly lad, tormented into womanish peevishness by the poor old woman's evolutions, with the muscular sportsman of this glorious Fall morning, affluent in strength, love, and hope!

We made "a day of it," as Wynant had threatened. The number and complaisance of lawful woodcock had not been over-lauded. Our gallant retriever did not flag once in persevering search and honest returns, and each of us was so

successful in his own shots as to move him to generous admiration of his comrade's skill. Rather leg-weary, but in gay spirits, we struck the main road a mile-and-a-half from home when the sun was near setting, and trudged leisurely down the "long hill," on a plateau of which stood the Brightwood cottage.

"What are your present emotions supperward?" inquired Wynant, shifting his gun to the other shoulder and adjusting the strap of his game-bag to a new position.

"I yearn!" replied I, in forcible slang. "The cold bite at noon exasperated me to renewed voracity instead of allaying my pangs. As a little water on a fire is worse than none."

"I was savage upon pot-hunters, this morning," Darling proceeded to confess. "But there is something transporting in the reflection that one has shot that which is eatable, when there is a void—or your 'cold bite—' where should repose, in process of amiable digestion, a good dinner. 'Broiled woodcock for breakfast' hath a goodly jingle in such circumstances."

"'Broiled chicken at an early supper' is more to the point."

"'Plato! thou reasonest well!' Come in, you rascal!" to the dog who darted after a rabbit's white tail in a sumach-bush. "I'll break your head, sir!" menacing poor Frank with the butt of the gun, "if I catch you at such low work as that again! There's nothing spoils a dog's nose for delicate game like rabbit-hunting."

"Is your gun loaded?" I asked.

Mrs. Darling, in consideration of Robby's propensity to meddle with dangerous toys, had laid down as a positive rule that no loaded fire-arms should be brought into the house.

"Yes!"

He stopped, raised the piece, his finger on the trigger, then dropped it back to its rest within his arm.

"I'll let Ailsie fire it off when we get home. She likes to do it. There's the making of a first-rate marksman in her. Next year, I shall get a light fowling-piece for her and take her gunning whenever I go."

"A novel accomplishment for a young lady," quoth I, carelessly.

"Accomplishments be hanged! I mean that girl to be brought up sensibly, and according to hygienic laws. She can row and swim now, and would be a good whip but for Evy's fear to trust her with a horse under fifteen years old. She handles a gun beautifully, as you'll see presently. Never winks, or lets it kick. There's not an atom of affectation about her. By Jove! what a magnificent woman she will be!"

"When she can bring down woodcock on the wing—and drive four-in-hand?" interpolated I. "And—in what other manly accomplishment do you propose to make her proficient?"

Secretly pleased at his unsuspecting enthusiasm, I guarded the manifestation of my relish at the turn the talk had taken. Since the dialogue on the piazza on the morning succeeding

my arrival, my resolution to win the family prize, if not more firm, was more distinctly defined in my own mind, yet more discreetly veiled from general view. Least of all would I put into the teazing uncle's hand the instrument of annoyance to Ailsie, should his amusement at the discovery of what he would regard as an unparalleled joke, exceed the bounds of affectionate consideration for her feelings.

"You may laugh, if you like!" he retorted, half-offended. "But she will be a glorious girl by the time she is sixteen. And you people who don't appreciate her fully now will be glad to join in her praises. Where will you see another eye and step like hers? Did you ever know another child who had one-tenth of her sense and wit? You like her *as* a child —a nice plaything, because she entertains you in your vacations and leisure hours. You never look forward to what she will become. Wait until you begin to know her as I do!"

He marched on, Frank still cowering at his heels, the memory of the brandished gun fresh upon him, and I fell back to laugh in my sleeve at the honest heat of the warm-hearted, dull-sighted athlete, whom not even his own betrothal had enlightened as to the signs of another's affection.

"Speak of the angels and you'll hear their wings!" he said abruptly, halting, finger uplifted and face alight.

Up the wooded road floated the voice of one who sang as she strolled toward us. She was coming to meet us, not thinking that we were so close to her. We stepped to the turf edging the highway, that she might come full upon us

at the next turning, now scarcely a hundred yards off. She should not be balked in her contemplated surprise. Wynant looked to the trigger and cap of his gun, that it might be in readiness for her fingers.

We could hear the words, now. I had caught the air at once; knew that she was dreamy, not expectant, thinking out 'beautiful things' in her sunset walk.

I have lived over those two minutes, a million times, torturing my imagination with vain thoughts of what might have been changed had I done this, or that, or had Wynant acted differently.

If he had discharged his gun according to his intention. If Frank had been suffered to run on, as was his wont in nearing home. If we had continued to converse in our ordinary key. If the ring of our heels upon the stony highway had betrayed our proximity. If one or all of these things had happened, this story might never have been written.

And always, in the agony of the retrospect, the useless regret and unavailing longing, I am walking on to meet the well-known figure, which I am sure will wear the oriole plumage I have told her I like best; straining my eyes to catch a glimpse of the buff dress between tree-boles, and under low-hanging branches, the while I picture to myself exactly what I shall see—a form as erect and a step as free as a gypsy queen's;—nut-brown hair tossed back from the dark, warm-tinted face,—the matchless eyes yet dusky with thought-shadows,—the smile that will end the song.

Still the silvery, dreamy singing draws nearer and nearer. We do not lose a syllable now, catch the accent of each note.

"Oh! cold was the night-wind that blew 'round her bower,
It chilled my poor Kathleen;—she drooped from that hour,
And I lost my own Kathleen, my sweet little Kathleen—
My Kathleen O'More!"

The holy calm of the sunset was broken by a wild shriek. Another and another followed,—wrung out by the extremity of physical or mental distress,—ere our swiftest run carried us around the curve in the road, and in sight of what it had hidden.

The besotted wretch we had met that morning was there, grinning fiendishly into the face of her he held fast by both arms. We comprehended the situation at a glance. He had sprung out at her from the covert of underwood with a drunken notion of a practical jest, or in revenge for her uncle's language to him in the forenoon. We both reached them at the same second.

"Ailsie!" I cried.

Wynant panted—"You villain!"

I saw my darling reel and sink, released from the rough clutch, and caught her before she reached the ground. I heard, not conscious then that I did so, a scuffle, a rain of blows and kicks, groans and curses uttered in a thick, coarse voice. It was nothing to me how the ruffian fared, while I held my shaken flower upon my breast, and strove, by caress and reassuring word, to restore color to the livid face, and

quiet the convulsive trembling that threatened to banish life as it had strength. Carrying her to a grassy glade in the woods, out of hearing of what was going on in the road, I laid her gently down, pillowing her head upon my arm, and fanning her with my hat. I told her she was safe and with me; implored her to look at and speak to me—to see for herself that the danger was over.

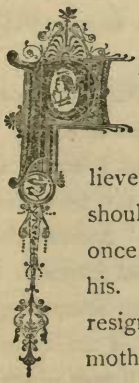
The power of articulation was utterly gone. She could only sob tearlessly, each breath jarring her entire frame. Her eyes had not opened since my call to her had caused the brute to relax his hold.

"We must get her home without delay," I said, when Wynant joined us, breathless from his struggle. "Don't speak to her! She cannot answer. Go on and explain what has happened!"

In the ditch, between the wheel-track and the stone fence, was stretched a thing, that might be alive or dead, filthy with blood and dust. I did not give it a second look, or a thought, except a passing emotion of gratitude that Ailsie could not see it.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### "GOOD-BYE, SWEETHEART."



RESSLEY DARLING met me at the entrance of the grove surrounding the house, and, dumb with haste and alarm, held out his arms to relieve me of the weight that still lay against my shoulder. He was her father. She had told me once that she was willing to lay down her life for his. But I shook my head and pressed on, never resigning the dear burden until I laid her upon her mother's bed, and in her mother's embrace.

Her hand fastened feebly upon the lappel of my coat, when I would have raised myself upright. The eyelids were lifted with effort, and the poor, unbent mouth tried to speak—once—twice—before the words escaped :

"I am *so* sorry! Forgive me! I am very sorry!"

Sorry that, in succumbing to the shock that had prostrated body and sense, she had given us trouble.

"My precious love!" I said, heedless who might hear. "Do not speak, do not think of us! We are only thankful to have you look at and know us again. Remember this, and nothing else. Can you swallow this for me?"

She tasted the lavender-and-water Aunt Evy had prepared, and did not like it.

"Must I?" looking at me.

"If you love me, dear!"

She raised her head and took every drop, sinking back with a sigh of exhaustion, and a long, shuddering gasp.

"It was dreadful! The man, I mean!" catching my hand and whispering, while her features worked uncontrollably. "He was *drunk!*"

The word rang out in shrill distress, and hiding her face with her hands, she began to sob again in tearless suffering.

The father's face was dark with wrath, and I heard a muttered curse from Wynant. Tears dropped fast from the mother's eyes in folding her child to her bosom. Aunt Evy's met mine across the bed in awed questioning and entreaty.

"Ailsie!" I stooped to say, steadily, and with something of authority blended with my tenderness,—"You are quite safe, now. Neither that man nor any other shall ever annoy you again. We will take such good care of you in future that there shall be no risk of this. He is a foolish, bad boy —Ziba Gaskin—do you recollect him? who meant to play a trick upon you. He has not harmed you. He never shall. Try to believe this, dear child!"

"I'll blow him to atoms if he tries it on again!" put in Wynant, his voice cracking queerly when he tried to laugh.

"Now, we will all go out and leave her with mamma for a while," said sagacious Aunt Evy, motioning to us to follow her. "Our hunters must be almost famished, and supper is ready."

In shutting the door after me, my eye lingered upon the

two who lay upon the bed, the final red ray of sunset seeming to band them in a closer embrace.

"'As one whom his mother comforteth!'" I repeated, inly.

Even love's jealousy could not interfere there. In no other arms would I have been content to leave my best-beloved.

The supper table waited vainly for mother and daughter. The rest of us made some poor feint of eating, and adjourned to the piazza to discuss, over and over again, the incident of the afternoon, in guarded tones, and with indignation that grew hotter with each repetition of the scene.

Pressley Darling never sat down for an instant, and his stride from end to end of the portico was portentous of further vengeance upon the creature still lying, for aught we knew or cared, in the ditch beyond the road. Wynant could not forgive himself for having left a vestige of life in him. Miss Marr and I, seeming to hearken to his blood-thirsty regrets, pondered, each knowing that the other did so, upon the probable extent of the harm already done, and what looked like the malignant fate that so strangely pursued a being so harmless and lovable. Repeated disasters of the kind that had so strangely befallen her would be hurtful to children of stouter nerve and coarser sensibilities. We dared not speak of, or fairly contemplate what they might bring upon this one.

Luckless Wynant blundered upon the hidden rock, presently.

"It's confoundedly queer when you come to think it all over! It would appear as if Fate had an actual spite against that child!" he was so bereft as to say. "There was the first scare with the drunken loafer in town years ago. Then, the thunderstorm that killed this vagabond's grandmother. Next, the chill on Thanksgiving-Day. Now, this infamous piece of work. I don't suppose any of you have looked at it in this light. Odd—isn't it?"

His brother stopped short in front of him.

"Don't charge upon Providence—for there is no such power as Fate—the egregious carelessness or vice of man! These were the causes of all the casualties you have enumerated, with the single exception of the thunderstorm. I do wish, however, that the consequences of others' sins had fallen elsewhere than upon the head of this sensitive, innocent baby!"

After which, silence reigned throughout the group.

At nine o'clock Mrs. Darling called from an upper window in a gentle, cheerful voice, designed, we comprehended, to dissipate our apprehensions.

"Papa! Ailsie would be very glad to see you, if you can come up-stairs."

He was absent twenty minutes or more, returning to us with softened voice and mien.

"She will sleep with her mother to-night," he said, addressing me. "She is almost composed again, but the evening has been an anxious one with my wife. The shuddering fits recurred at brief intervals, for two hours. Will you

look in, and let us know whether or not a sedative is advisable!"

There was no lamp in the chamber, and the harvest-moon, large and yellow, filled it with rich, yet chastened light.

"It reminds me of Thanksgiving night," said Ailsie, when I had felt her pulse and heard that she was "pretty well, only trembly, now and then."

"I have been lying here, thinking of it. I am a regular nuisance to you all. The most *accidental* child I ever heard of. Decidedly the scrape-y one of the family."

She never hesitated for a word. If none lay ready to her hand she made one for the occasion and went on with what she had to say.

"Mr. Barry!"

I sat on the edge of the bed, holding her hand, as on that other night, when I had first said to myself that I loved her better than all the world besides. Her disengaged hand stole timidly up my sleeve. Her tone and look were deprecatory.

"Mr. Barry! Shall I always be a coward? And will things go on happening to me all my life?"

"I hope so, darling! Very pleasant things. You wouldn't have every day just like its yesterdays and to-morrows."

"Adventures, I mean. Disagreeable ones. Catastrophes!" The word was a mouthful, but she managed it cleverly. "I'd rather die at once and get clear of it all. I'm like a foolish little mouse, with a cat watching behind every corner. You wouldn't believe it, but every joint in me

aches. Only because I was silly enough to get frightened out of my wits. And"—stretching her arms over her head with a plaintive little moan—"I am *so* tired!"

Twice that night I crept to the door of Mrs. Darling's room and listened for sound from within. Once it was a weary sigh, intermitted by a slight sob that brought my heart into my throat. The mother's soothing was prompt and love-full.

"Mamma's birdie! I am here, my blessing!"

The second time, I could hear nothing but soft, regular breathing, and returned to my upper chamber, relieved and comforted. The sun was up when I again passed the threshold. At the other end of the passage was Ailsie's dormitory. The door was standing open, and I had a view of the interior clear through to the balcony where she was wont to "lay her pillows on hot nights, and, like Kathleen, 'look at the moon' and stars, and have the deliciousest thinking times all to herself."

I trod cautiously along the matted hall lest I should awake the slumberers upon the lower floor, and stood within the small room. It was bright and clean, and her own little treasures were disposed about the walls and on the dressing-bureau. An ambrotype of myself I had given her last Christmas-Eve, had accompanied her from town, and now occupied a corner bracket. A tiny vase of flowers was set in front of it, and the frame was wreathed with ground pine. Streamers of the same trailed around the oval mirror and made a cornice for the muslin curtain of the broad window that opened

down to the balcony. It was a pretty and tasteful bower, yet the bare sadness of the place struck coldly to my heart. The white emptiness of the low bed with its unrumpled coverlet and plump pillows; the prim arrangement of the furniture, telling that no living presence had been there overnight—were more than I could bear.

I shut the door upon the pathetic vacancy, and fled the spot as I would fain have sped away from the associations I had aroused.

In the main hall on the first floor, I stopped to select my unremarkable summer straw from half-a-dozen hats of similar pattern that crowded the rack. I had just discovered that I had taken Wynant's instead of my own, when a trailing step that I did not recognize stole down the stairway behind me. It was Ailsie, dressed with her customary care, but heavy eyed, and unsmiling even at my delighted salutation.

"Is it possible!" I said. "Good morning! I am very glad to see that you are well enough to be stirring so early. How do you feel?"

I took her hand and finding it drier and warmer than I liked, would have slipped my finger to the wrist, but she drew it away, still grave, with no sign of her habitual liveliness.

"Quite well, thank you. I am going to feed the chickens."

"Is that best? Let me do it alone, for once. Are you strong enough?"

"Of course I am! Why not?"

My catechism annoyed her for some reason. Her tone

was almost pettish, and she went off to the barn for her feed-basket, with no intimation by word or sign, that she desired my company. I read the riddle, or believed that I did. With nerves still irritable after yesterday's trial, she was ashamed at the memory of her weakness and shunned all reference to it. With characteristic philosophy she had determined that since the matter could not be helped, she having, as she judged, made herself supremely ridiculous and the cause of much anxiety to others—the less said about it the better. It was natural, too, that she should avoid the revival of disagreeable sensations such as a recapitulation of the roadside scene would be likely to awaken.

She was a sage and prudent little woman, I decided, while weighing these considerations and assisting her in collecting and feeding her feathered bantlings. Any other child would have enjoyed the prolonged sensation and continued petting, maintained the *rôle* of heroine as long as we would indulge her in it. Our business in the poultry-yard was transacted in much less time and with infinitely less spirit than on any previous occasion. While she went into the kitchen to wash her hands, I purposely preceded her to the breakfast-room and served notice upon the party assembled there to emulate my example of kindly discretion. Her entrance was greeted affectionately, but without marked demonstration of any kind, save that her father drew her chair closer to him, as she sat down, and Wynant selected the finest woodcock on the dish for her eating, with the promise that he would teach her to bring down more and

larger birds than we could show, if she would become his pupil next season. She was shy and still, while we talked merrily and took no visible notice of her indisposition to follow our lead. When the meal was over, she was allowed to go to the piano for her morning practising.

Aunt Evy and I talked comfortably and without forebodings, upon the piazza, I smoking, and she busy with her fancy-knitting, while scales and exercises and set pieces, more or less difficult, were executed by the patient fingers.

"Wynant visited the field of battle early this morning," said Miss Marr, sinking her voice. "His vanquished foe had come to life, apparently, and retreated in tolerable order. I imagine our young Hercules would have been better pleased if he had been obliged to crawl home on his hands and knees. She—" motioning toward the parlor—"seems almost herself again, don't you think so?"

"Except for the slight depression which is the reaction after extreme excitement, increased, I suspect, by a tinge of mortification at the part she played. We are acting wisely in letting her believe that we think lightly of the affair. By to-morrow, she will be disposed to laugh over it. The fright is too recent now."

Aunt Evy shivered. "Thank Heaven it has ended so well! It was a fearful experiment!"

"Which nobody but a brute or a fool would make! Don't spoil my last day with you by setting me to speculate about what has *not* happened."

I had meant to give most of the day to Ailsie, but a suc-

cession of untoward trifles thwarted intention and desire. Pressley Darling, who had come up from town but two days before the termination of my visit, invited me to a ramble with him before Ailsie's hour was more than three-quarters "off her mind." With the pardonable energy of proprietorship, he led the way over "upland, dale, and glen," in the refreshing persuasion that every stick and stone and clod must be as replete with interest to me as to himself. It was twelve o'clock when we got back, more tired, hot and dusty than our gunning tramp had made me. Running up to my room for a cooling bath of face and hands before dinner, I observed that the door at the other end of the passage was shut. It was still fast when my simple toilet was completed. Hoping that Ailsie might be within, I whistled softly, two or three times—a signal long ago agreed upon between us. The doorway remained a solid blank. Nor did I see the mistress of the balconied bower until we all sat down to dinner.

In the afternoon Squire Darling, with his lovely old wife and an assorted carriage-load of grandchildren, drove over from the farm, Rick, my most formidable rival, acting as outrider. The whole party remained at Brightwood until after supper. Rick monopolized his favorite cousin, according to custom. They went out upon the lake at sunset, after a long ramble in the woods. Sitting with their elders on the piazza and bearing a decent part in their discourse, I watched the "Midget," a floating speck upon the incarnadine glory of the water; heard the young voices in the

boating-song Ailsie and I had sung together on other, but never fairer evenings.

"O, come, maidens, come, o'er the blue rolling wave
The lovely should still be the care of the brave.
Trancadillo! trancadillo!
With moonbeam and eyebeam we'll bound o'er the billow."

From a sentiment of chivalric generosity that had its admixture of quiet amusement, I had kept myself aloof from them this afternoon. The boy should have a fair chance. But I was not amused while thus watching them. Jealousy was out of the question. Not so, disappointment. I wished the excellent relatives had postponed their visit for a day; I wished more heartily that they had not stayed with us until half-past eight o'clock, preferring to wait until the moon was up.

It was nine o'clock—Ailsie's nominal bed-time, before I could make an opportunity to say a few sentences to her, alone. Aunt Evy helped me by more adroit manœuvres than my impatient artifices could claim to be called, or this minute morsel of cheer would not have been mine.

We stood together, then, on the porch looking lake-ward, the honeysuckle, freighted with dew and sweetness, drooping to my shoulder and her head—my arm about her waist, my heart too full for much speaking.

"You will not fail to write to me, every week?" I said. "I shall be very lonely and home-sick for six days. Only tolerably happy on that on which I receive your letter."

"I shall write every Tuesday, regularly," she replied.

The quiet monotone was not her voice. She was weary after the bustle of entertaining her visitors, and, like myself, heavy of spirit. She would miss me sadly, I knew, and the various delights of the holiday we had enjoyed in company.

"How you have grown this summer!" remarked I, more brightly. "It seems but yesterday that you were proud of coming up to my elbow. Don't outgrow your strength in your anxiety to overtake my preposterous inches."

She dropped her head to touch my hand to her lips.

"How good you have been to me, always!" she said, irrelevantly. "You will never know—because I shall never be able to manage my words well enough to tell you—how dearly, *dearly* I love you!"

"Eyes and kisses are better than words for that, Ailsie!"

Her head with its wealth of hair—"outwardly brown, inwardly golden"—very dark in the moonlight, returned to its resting-place upon my heart, for a long moment.

Then she raised it, sighing under the pressure of thought or fatigue.

"Mamma will be wondering why I do not go to bed," in the even, listless tone that had engaged for her part of our correspondence. "Staying here doesn't make it any easier to say 'good-night.' And that means 'good-by,' to-night. You will be in a hurry in the morning. Everybody else will be around, too."

She clasped her hands behind my neck as I bent to kiss her, held me in a clinging caress, and left me without speaking again.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### "WITHERED."

ONE forenoon in mid-October, I loitered upon the hospital steps, after an hour's walk in the sunshine, reluctant to encounter the cool dimness of the interior. The very streets were less noisy than was usual at that busy hour. The turmoil of traffic was attuned to something like harmony with the placid perfectness of the day. Autumn—the ripeness, not decadence of the year—had stayed late with us. Frosty nights garlanded the trees with bright, soft jewels, opened the nut-shells, changed the crude juices of grapes and thick-skinned pears to spiced syrups. But the mornings and evenings were bracing—not keen ; the noons rich and bland.

"'Lustrous and smiling!'" I quoted, lingering and luxuriating. "Old Burton—spirit quaint as fine—said it of a woman's hair. It paints this day to a charm. The man who helps me to a felicitous phrase is my benefactor."

A wain, loaded high with wheat-straw, had stopped on the corner. A man was walking slowly toward me with a dozen red balloons, or inflated bladders, such as children play with, floating above his head from the string in his hand. The

golden straw, the crimson globes caught and pleased the eye in the mild glow that tempered the fierce brick-dust and vicious greens of walls and shutters in the tall buildings lining the thoroughfare. The whole was a goodly study of color and light.

"'Lustrous and smiling!'" I reiterated, and smiled myself in recollecting who had said to me once, as I stroked and praised the gleaming waves of her hair:

"It does well enough, I dare say. If only it didn't have *red* streaks—real blaze-y lines across it, after I have been wearing it braided! On the shiniest parts—the crinkles, you know!"

My office was on the second floor of the hospital, surrounded by rows of wards. Not an attractive retreat for one's leisure hours, and certainly not a place to which one would care to invite his friends. Just without the door I met an attendant, who told me that a lady had been waiting some time to see me. Without presentiment that she might be there upon other than professional business, I entered and saw Mrs. Darling sitting in my one arm-chair.

"Ah, Barry! At last!"

The exclamation was nervous, or impatient, and I answered it by an apology before she could explain.

"I am very sorry I have kept you waiting. I am seldom out at this hour. If I had had the remotest idea that you were in town—"

Here the coldness of her hand, perceptible through her glove as I pressed it, made me look narrowly at her. She

smiled and spoke cordially, but her eyelids were slightly flushed, and her lips twitched in a manner very foreign to her habitual serenity.

"Is anything wrong?" I asked hastily. "You are all well?"

She resumed her chair. The trembling of the mouth was more perceptible.

"I do not know that anything is far wrong. I have been sadly uneasy for several weeks. Pressley is away from home, as you know, travelling on business through the Western States. I have not written to him of what troubles me. My fears are so vague, and anxiety would only unsettle his mind. In a case like this where there is no pain, or fever, one is at a loss how to describe symptoms accurately."

She had begun to hurry in her speech, and paused to collect thought or composure. I sat quietly opposite to her, genuinely and seriously concerned by what I had gleaned from her address. Her sister was my own by adoption and affection. That this preamble referred to her I never doubted. I had had no letter from her since September, and in Ailsie's weekly bulletins of home news, there were repeated references to Aunt Evy's sick headaches, and regrets that she "did not seem as well as she was earlier in the season."

"What are the symptoms that have alarmed you?" I queried, to make her task simpler.

"Drowsiness, lassitude, and a lack of interest in what formerly pleased her. At times—but this is not frequent—an outbreak of irritability totally unlike her natural self.

Lately, a rapid decrease in flesh and weight that is unaccountable, since her appetite is moderately good. She falls asleep at any hour, and anywhere. Twice we have found her lying upon the parlor floor in slumber—or lethargy. It is more like that. When aroused, she is dull and silent. Indeed, she shows a disinclination for conversation most of the time. It breaks my heart to see her going slowly about the light duties she used to undertake so gladly. She is faithful to these still. She must always be conscientious. But the life and spring are gone."

"When did you begin to notice these things?" I inquired, more to give her time to recover her faltering voice than for my own information. Her agitation was painful to behold, bravely as she contended with its exhibition.

"We did not know it until afterward, but she slept away all the forenoon of the last day you spent with us at Brightwood. I had to send up to her room at dinner-time to awaken her. Evy and I have feared—yet we cannot understand how that could be—we dare not admit the possibility—but these symptoms manifested themselves so soon after it— Do *you* believe, Barry, that the fright had anything to do with it?"

She burst into tears.

"The fright!" I said, huskily, growing cold to my heart. "For Heaven's sake, Mrs. Darling, don't say that you have been telling me about Ailsie! I thought you meant Miss Marr!"

"Evy is well—for her, but inexpressibly anxious," she re-

turned, drying her eyes. "She has not written to you in some weeks, because she could not, and conceal the truth. And you could not come to us. It was enough that we should be unhappy, without distressing you. After all, we may be unnecessarily alarmed."

"I have heard from Ailsie every week," I said, with an effort to examine the case rationally. "Her letters have not been long, but she explained that by saying that there was little new to tell about her life in the country, now that I had seen everything at Brightwood."

The mother's tears rushed up again.

"Ah! those letters! If you had guessed what power of patient resolve was expended upon them you would prize them indeed. On a certain day, at a given hour, she would address herself to the business of writing to you, persevering until the bottom of the third page was reached, although ready, sometimes, to fall from her chair when this was accomplished. I have urged her, several times, to postpone writing, saying that you would excuse her if she were not well. Her answer was always to the same effect: "I promised to write every Tuesday, and I am not sick." Once she added, "I like to write better than to do anything else. At least, I would, if my hand didn't get so tired. Somehow, I feel tired all through, now a days. Mamma, do you suppose I am growing lazy?" She was so exhausted by our ride, yesterday, that I put her to bed as soon as we arrived at home."

"She is here, then? In your own house?"

"Yes. I preceded Evy and the other children by a few days that I might get the house settled, and brought her along ostensibly for company. Really, that I might see you and secure medical advice. She showed more animation, this morning, at the thought of receiving a visit from you than I have seen her display in many weeks. Can you call upon us to-day?"

"Not before four o'clock this afternoon," I replied, sorrowfully. "I can get off duty, then—perhaps for the rest of the day."

"Come to tea! Ailsie will be delighted. That is"—correcting herself in a failing voice—"as nearly delighted as she can be, now. You would not know her, Barry—our withered blossom!"

I accompanied her to the front entrance; stood there, an instant, looking down the street as I had done, not thirty minutes ago. The sunshine slumbered as placidly upon buildings and pavements. The steeple-clocks were striking twelve. In a church-tower some blocks away, the chimes were playing, "Life let us cherish." Crowds of school-children were trooping along the sidewalks bound for home or frolic in the noon recess. One—a brown-haired girl about Ailsie's size, looked up at me with merry eyes, as she bounded by.

Sick of brightness, I put my hand to my dizzied head, and went back up-stairs, nominally and mechanically, to work.

"You would not know her, Barry—our withered blossom!"

Of the interview that had overturned the world for me, I seemed to retain but that one sentence, and the deeper heart-ache (if that could be!) that smote me with the hearing of her set purpose, persisted in so painfully, of writing to me.

My loyal love! faithful in weakness as in strength!

I not know Ailsie's eyes and Ailsie's smile? "Withered!" My hale English girl, whose wholesome reserve of vitality might bid defiance to disease for a century! Had I dreamed the horrible scene, from beginning to end? Could I have misunderstood the unhappy mother? Or was the hallucination hers?

By four o'clock I was at liberty to go whither I would. Sky and wind had changed. Gray mists, smelling of the sea, were streaming up in plumy pennons from the east. The low sun was already hidden. One would hardly have known the day for the same. The phrase strayed of itself into my mind and from my tongue. "Not know it for the same." Would that other change be as woful? My heart beat fast, yet with difficulty, as I turned into the well-remembered street.

The parlor shutters were open, and a face was watching for me in the old place. The next moment I was within the door; the wasted form lying upon my bosom, raised in my embrace as I might hold an infant. When I could speak, and dared trust myself to look into her face, I drew her near the window, and scanned the altered features. Her mother was partly right. But for her eyes I should hardly have

been able to identify her with the plump, rosy gypsy I had parted with, five weeks before.

Yet—and the truth went through my heart like a knife—she was less like a sick than an etherealized child. Her complexion was purely pale—not sallow. There was even a flush of pink in her cheeks. And the eyes—that had deepened as well as enlarged and brightened—how shall I paint the wistful intensity—the languor of yearning in their gaze? They were the gates of the soul always; now, not ajar, but opened wide by some mysterious touch—of what angel, I shuddered to think.

"Don't stare at me so hard!" she said, trying to avert her face. "Indeed, I am not sick. I haven't an ache or a pain. People worry me out of all patience by saying how much I have 'fallen away.' Old Mrs. King, our house-cleaner, screeched right out yesterday, when she opened the door for us. 'Land's sake! but ain't she failed powerful, mem?' I wish they would mind their own business!"

"So do I!" responded I, sincerely. "But my business is to set you up strong and plump again, and I mean to set about it, forthwith. What is the use of having a doctor in the family if you never give him anything to do?"

The hand I fondled was thin, and the palm dry, with a peculiar look about the latter that, more than anything else in her appearance, justified the epithet of "withered." I noted this at the time, as a phenomenon, with no misgiving as to its real significance. Nor, watch and study her as I might and did, throughout that portion of the evening she

spent with us ; nor in the long talk I held with her mother after she went to bed, could I detect the probable secret of the fearful change wrought in these brief weeks. For all our united wisdom could discover, it was as causeless, save for the nervous shock she had received in September, as the wasting of a snow-drift on a sunless winter day with the thermometer at zero.

The east wind was strong and bitter when I emerged from the house. For this reason, and no other, as I then believed, I chose a different route from that I generally took back to my rooms—one sheltered for most of its length by solid blocks of houses. Skirting these at a swinging gait, with my head down and thoughts busy with those I had left, I ran directly against a gentleman who was coming from the opposite direction.

"I beg pardon!" we said simultaneously.

"Dr. Tremaine!" I subjoined. "I trust I have not hurt you!" recognizing a leading physician of the city and a constant friend of my own.

"Dr. Haye—is it not?" holding his hat fast on his head in the rushing wind. "This is an odd happening! I was thinking of you. There is a man in your hospital in whom I am much interested. Would you object to my turning back with you for some talk about him? Your office is nearer than mine, or I would invite you to go on with me."

In three minutes we were snugly established before my fire, launched on the high tide of conversation.

The original topic disposed of, he arose.

"You are doing me a personal kindness in promising to look after this case," he said, in his terse, nervous style.

Everything pertaining to moral, mental or pecuniary disorder falls, with the man of medicine, under the head of "case" as naturally as do bodily ailments.

"If I can ever do anything to prove my appreciation of it, please command me."

Thus it happened—again a "happening," as I supposed—that I entered upon a description of Ailsie's condition and my perplexity respecting it.

He listened, standing, to a synopsis of the symptoms,—then, the physician soul fairly alive, he dropped into a chair, and questioned sharply and rapidly. This over, he sat in profound deliberation for at least five minutes, plucking at his under lip and projecting his eyebrows as he had a queer habit of doing. I got up to mend the fire.

"He knows no more about it than I do!" I was soliloquizing mentally, leaning over the grate, tongs in hand, when he spoke two words.

The tongs crashed upon the fender, and I confronted him with a face which I felt grow ghastly.

"Impossible!" I said.

"It is easily ascertained," he answered, with diabolical coolness. "If the case were mine I would know the truth in less than twenty-four hours."

I had to control myself by the recollection that he had never seen the proposed patient before I could reply.

"It shall be yours! I cannot go with you in the morn-

ing, but you can return the slight service I have rendered you, a thousand-fold, by calling upon Mrs. Darling early in the day. I will write a note of introduction."

With treacherous fingers I penned the few lines that told Ailsie's mother who the bearer was, and what were his recommendations to her confidence. Dr. Tremaine eyed me keenly under his beetling brows, thumb and fore-finger pulling at his lip.

"You say the child is between ten and eleven years old?" he said, puzzled probably by my evident disquiet, and searching for an adequate reason.

"She will not be eleven until late in December."

"That is against her, if my hypothesis with regard to her malady be correct. There is not a case on record of recovery from the disease I have named, when the patient was under twenty years of age. Frankly—and I have made the matter a specialty—I regard it as incurable at any age. Much may be accomplished in the way of sustenance of the decaying powers by tonics and dietetics; but the end is inevitable. It is a mere question of time."

I think I was nearer actual murder at that instant than at any other period of my life. I hated him in whose hands I had placed the verdict of living or dying for my darling. I could scarcely reply civilly to the friendly nonchalance of his "Good-night."

"Rely upon my prompt attention to the case we have been discussing!" he said, as he took leave. "The more I

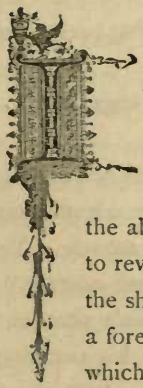
think of it, the more firm is my conviction that my interpretation of the mystery is the right one."

"How dared he! how *dared* he!" I ground out, from between my clenched teeth, when the room was clear of him and his odious theorizing. "If it be proved that he is mistaken, I will never forgive him, never!"

Then I threw myself upon the floor, and wept like a hysterical woman, over my withered blossom.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### "PULLING THROUGH."



IN three days we knew the worst there was to tell, or to hear. Terrified and overwhelmed by Dr. Tremaine's opinion of her daughter's state, Mrs. Darling called a consultation of the ablest men known to the profession in our city, to reverse, or confirm his decision. But one gave the shadow of hope, and his views were based upon a foreign treatise on this and cognate maladies, of which he had just received an advance copy.

I borrowed the pamphlet, copied it entire, and the regimen imposed by it, as the slender chance of salvation from death, was adopted without delay. I am thankful there is no need for me to enter here into the details of the privations to which the patient child was subjected by our obedience to the Paris physician's code. I would rather remember that no medicines were given her except tonics, that every luxury permitted by the regulations governing her diet was procured for her; that, one and all, we followed zealously the unanimous recommendation of the doctors to afford her freely the diversions of exercise in the open air, cheerful society, games and story-books, and to spare the tried nerves and brain by every device that the ingenuity of love could conceive.

Her father purchased a horse and gave it to her.

"For my very own!" she said to me at my afternoon visit on the day of the event. "And either he or you are to take me driving every day. So papa says. 'Oh! let us be joyful!' as Mr. Chadband says."

She waltzed three times round the room, flying back to me on the tips of her toes.

"Now I *shall* get well! It would be very ungrateful if I did not."

"She may pull through," said the doctor, who had allowed us to hope. "She has an exceptionally fine constitution. Her recovery would be but a degree short of a miracle. Yet there have been miracles, even in the nineteenth century."

Every moderately fine day, therefore, "Ailsie's phaeton" was brought to the door, and her father left his counting-house, or I my office, to act as charioteer. Aunt Evy's parlor looked like a Vanity-fair wareroom with the pretty knick-knacks collected by and for the household favorite. Each morning I left in person a bouquet for the vase in "Sister Anne's window," as we named the post of observation from which she watched for my evening visit. The days were short, now, and when the street-lamps were kindled, I could only trace the outline of her form upon the red duskiness of the background. She would not have the parlor lighted except by the fire-glow until my arrival.

"Gas lights made the frames like black mirrors," she said, "and the world outside invisible."

The outside world saw little of any of us during those

anxious weeks. Ailsie was never left alone by day, and at the even-tide we gathered about her with solicitous fondness that must have seemed overstrained to those unacquainted with the imminence of the danger that threatened us through her. After our first anguished consultation, we four—her parents, aunt, and myself—never spoke out our fears to one another, but each felt that it was a hand-to-hand battle with the destroyer, and as one day after another dragged by, the hope trembled into life in the breast of each that, inch by inch, we were gaining upon the foe. Drowsiness and lassitude were vanquished symptoms; the step had its former lightness, and was at times as fleet. The figure had never drooped. The spirited grace of the "thoroughbred" defied disease—even a waste so deadly as that which had robbed the complexion of its rich tints, the supple limbs of their roundness.

When her father called at my office one November day, to announce that Ailsie had gained a pound of flesh within a fortnight, we shook hands over the news as over a national victory, and laughed in each other's faces—we two bearded men—with eyes that saw but dimly through warm mists of gladness.

In my rounds that forenoon, I recognized the reflection of my own sunlit heart in many a wan countenance. I had grown strangely tender in sympathy, very tolerant in my treatment of suffering strangers, while my blossom was fading. I hope I had never been callous. I am sure I had not been harsh in my professional dealings, but the dull eye

of stupor and the flush of fever, the sight of thinning cheeks that had once been round, touched me now to the quick. Whenever and wherever I went among the crowd of unfortunates, in clinical or surgical ward, I carried one prayer until my heart beat to its fervent measure. I remembered the Physician of old and forever, who, when He could do no mighty work among His own kindred and in the home of His boyhood because of their unbelief, yet out of the great compassion that was in Him, "laid His hands upon a few sick folk and healed them." As the sick—snatched hastily from their beds and laid in the highroad, clogging His feet as He trod the sorrowful way whose end He was never to forget for one waking hour of His three-and-thirty-years—clutched at the hem of His robe, I clung to the thought of His humanity, beseeching Him because He knew what was in man—what weakness of faith and what strength of human affection—to have pity upon me and the little maid (younger even than the ruler's daughter) whom I loved.

The shadow upon the dial of Ahaz went backward ten degrees that trembling Hezekiah might know, for a certainty, that his prayer for life was answered. I thought it not presumption in me to ask that I might discern in the success of my ministry to the Lord's poor and smitten ones the sign that my cry for help had been heard. If, by unsolicited vigils and tireless labors beside and for those who, to mortal eye, seemed marked for speedy doom, I could wave back the shadowing wings, might it not be accepted as part of the ransom of the precious life?

"Ye look as if summat had heartened ye up a bit," observed an Englishman—a Yorkshireman—who had been dragged out of a fallen house, the previous week, with a broken collar-bone, a compound fracture of the leg and three cracked ribs.

"Something has!" I answered, smiling.

"Yer hands beant never heavy," he pursued. "But tudday they bees uncommon loight and delikit-loike. Ye couldn't handle yer sweetheart's feenger more tender nor ye're easin thot beeg j'int o'moine."

I smiled again and went on with the bandaging.

"Mebbe ye bees thinkin' o' hur, the whoile?" he ventured, with a broad, kindly grin.

"Perhaps so!"

"You've got one, then, hev you?" said another voice, in unmistakable Yankee dialect.

A thump between my shoulders emphasized the delicate jest.

"How did you get in here?" I demanded, frowning at Ezra Gaskin, in his Sunday suit, his leathery jaws wrinkled in longitudinal creases with his best attempt at an engaging smile.

"Come with a friend of ourn who ain't likely to give me much more trouble for a spell. It's my opinion he's goin' to make a die of it. Ther's been a row, some kind, on the wharf, and this fool-fellow, he was into it, of course. It's a way he hez. Ma and me we had jest come to town fur our winter shoppin', and I happened ter fall in with the skipper of our

sloop, the Mary Jane—and sez he—'I've got a permit from the hospittle fur yer nevy,' sez he. 'Won't you go 'long, and see him got in reg'lar and decent, seein' you're nighest of kin?' That's how I'm here. Say! when you've did that 'ere chap up all square, will you take Ziby in hand?"

"Not if there's another doctor in the establishment who can attend to him!" I retorted. "I would sooner pitch him out of the window, and you after him!"

My poor Yorkshireman looked up with a grimace of pain at the compression of the sore flesh under the roller I was adjusting.

"I beg your pardon, my good fellow!" I said to him. "I have no right to make you suffer for the sins of others."

Ezra did not retreat as I had meant that he should.

"Come now!" he resumed in a tone he designed for wheedling. "'Taint Christian-like for to bear malice. I ain't denyin' that the Darlings hez got some right for to be bad friends with me and mine, and so, I s'pose, you think you hev, considerin' you air so desprit thick—you 'n' them—tarred with the same stick ez one mought say. Fact is, I hed to send Ziby off the farm, turn him out o' house and home, you may say, and him an orph'n,—on account of that little rumpus last summer. I was actilly afeered that youngest Darling—that bloody-minded, onprinci*pelled* vagabone of a Wynant—would kill him at sight. No sech gret loss, I s'pose you think. But kin is kin, and 'though I 'low he's a bad lot, I'd be loth to have him cut down vi'lent and him unprepared, and an inquest in my house. So, off I bundles

him to town, and sot him to work with a carpenter, and this is what come on it, you see. If anything should happen from his hurts, my skirts is clear. I can't answer for the Darlings. People's consciences ain't all cut after the one pattern."

He appeared nowise averse to the prospect of his relative's "regular and decent" demise in a city hospital, I imagined.

"It is against the rules for you to stand talking here," said I very curtly. "Your nephew will be properly cared for by competent doctors and nurses. You had better go back to your wife and your shopping."

"'Twould be a raal comfort for to leave him into a friend's hands," he persisted, without moving. "So's I could hear how he was a-gettin' on and in case of anything happening, I'd hev infermation sent to me. I'm his guardeen by his father's will, and ther's a piece o' property on which his father hed a mor'gage. It's in the court now—the property, I mean—and ef the other fellows don't swaller it up with their first mor'gage ther' maybe a chance o'somethin' comin' to Ziby. And, in the event of his dessolution, I'd be his heir, seein' he ain't of age."

I beckoned up an attendant—a stalwart porter.

"See this man down stairs and into the street!" I said. "He is disturbing the peace of the ward. Don't let him in again without my permission."

"By jarge!" uttered my Englishman, eyeing the slouching yeoman as he was escorted down the long room by the broad-shouldered Milesian. "He'd fain talk 'ee legs off an iron

pot—yon chap! Ye wur hard on he, maister—main hard! I'd niver tho't to heer ye coom so naigh sweering. It's the mairciful as obteens maircy, sir. No offence to yer honor!"

I bit my lip to hold in the tart word his interference merited, and finished dressing his injuries before I trusted myself to reply:

"There is a text, too, in the Good Book about being angry and sinning not, my friend. You would have kicked that fellow down the stairs had you been able to stand upright and known all that I do about him and his blackguard nephew. Or you are not the man I take you for."

True to my threat, I did not approach the bed on which Ziba Gaskin lay. It was at one end of the ward, and I could avoid it conveniently. He was well-looked after by my coadjutor, a clever young man who reported the case to me as severe, rather than dangerous. The chief cause of apprehension was in the inflammatory state of the system consequent upon his habits.

I took advantage of Ailsie's temporary absence from the room that evening, to relate to Miss Marr the remarkable instance of righteous retribution that had laid the wretch who had done me most harm at the door of my mercy.

"But you would have succored him had his life depended upon your professional care?" she said seriously.

"I doubt it! Perhaps a rigid rendering of the physician's oath might make it obligatory upon me to tie up an artery to keep him from bleeding to death. But I would not like to engage for myself to do even that much for him."

The tender, mournful eyes were fixed upon me, I knew, and in my obstinacy I would not meet them. I heard her sigh softly.

"I am not as good as you, Aunt Evy! I am too young —my hates and loves are too ardent to accomplish such a feat of forgiveness as would be involved in personal attendance upon Ziba Gaskin, however badly hurt he might be."

Ailsie stood in the open door. I feared from the startled eyes that went quickly from my lowering brow to Aunt Evy's face, that a portion of the last sentence had been overheard. The fellow's name was never mentioned in the family, and, heartily vexed at my own imprudence, I watched her narrowly during the rest of my stay, that I might judge for myself if harm had been done by it. She was very gentle and cheerful. Her former wild spirits were tempering daily into a loveliness of calm that heightened her resemblance to her "twin."

"So you have been gaining flesh!" I said, gayly, patting her head approvingly as she occupied her low stool at my knee. "We shall have you as round and ruddy as a Spitzenberg apple by Christmas."

She smiled, held my palm to her cheek and made no other answer.

"Beefsteak, oysters and omelets ought to pad one's bones pretty comfortably," I continued. "I say, Ailsie, I am growing distressingly gaunt. Can't you persuade your Dr. Lawrence to prescribe such diet for me?"

"I dare say you take enough of them without his pre-

scriptions," said she dryly. "They seem to do you so little good you had better try a course of Graham bread and gentian tea. Dr. Lawrence says there's nothing better for restoring the tone of the system. The older the bread and the stronger the tea, the better for you. One ought to get up a very loud tone upon such stuff as that—a perfect *yell!* I know I feel like it when I take my bitters."

"You are growing saucy as you grow stronger," said her aunt. "That is a good sign."

"We must take her to Brightwood early next summer. By the first of June at latest," I went on. "By nutting-time, she will be as well as ever. And, Ailsie! don't let it afflict you too much—but I am to have six weeks' vacation then. My two years' apprenticeship will have expired."

She did not reply, nor turn her eyes from the fire.

"What are you thinking of?" asked I.

"Of several things. One is, I am glad you are to have a long holiday after working so hard. Then, I was thinking of the time—ever and ever so many years ago—when you took me nutting in the winter, and what a rage I got into with the lady who sat down at our table and told you—what wasn't true. What a little spitfire I was!"

"I don't care to have you recollect anything that happened that day." Foolish as it was, I colored at the reminiscence. "I would rather have you think of the jolly day we spent among the Brightwood hills, a year ago last month. When you played Robin Redbreast to this babe-in-the-wood, and adorned me with 'crown jewels' besides. And

of the many frolics we are to have there together, next year."

"Did you know that we get all the wood we burn from those hills?" inquired Ailsie, still studying the blazing sticks upon the fire-dogs. "Sometimes I wish we didn't! It's only a notion, of course. But I imagine the logs suffer more in the fire than others that come from we don't know or care where. I know just how lovely the air and sunshine were that gave them their sap, and how fresh and sweet the summer showers were that used to patter on their leaves. It looks like such cruel waste to see their life drip! drip! dripping down upon the hearth."

I read Aunt Evy's thought as truly as she knew that it was likewise mine, and that sorrow for waste more real and cruel wrung my heart as it did hers.

"We shall be ashamed to look their brother and cousin trees in the face, next summer, if we indulge such fancies," I said. "You must not spoil the beauty of Aunt Evy's wood fire for me. How do you suppose Jack will take your preference for Tricksy?" (the new horse). "Won't he be hurt if you refuse to drive him?"

She did not answer immediately. Her hands—very slender now—clasped each other more tightly, but she stared straight into the fire without other motion.

"Do you think—" she began, in a sweet, thrilling voice scarcely above a whisper—"that it is well for us to talk much about things that may never happen? Next summer is a long way off. Even if I should be at Brightwood then—"

She arose and moved to the window; pressed her face to the glass, feigning to look out—then quitted the room.

"Who has been talking to her?" demanded I, indignantly. "What do you suppose she means?"

"She may be nearer right than we," said Aunt Evy, tremulously. "God only knows! But the notion—pray Heaven it may be nothing more—is her own. We are all hopeful of her final restoration. I have never felt that we were to drink of the cup the thought of whose bitterness makes us heart-sick unto death. Even Dr. Lawrence, who is the impersonation of professional caution, is encouraged."

"As he ought to be! He would be purblind if he did not see how rapidly she has rallied in the last fortnight. These bracing northwesters have put new life into her. To foster these unhealthy fancies would be the worst thing conceivable. We rely upon her indomitable spirit—her 'game blood,' as Wynant calls it, as much as upon her constitution, to pull her through."

Aunt Evy repeated the four concluding words.

"That is a genuine doctor's phrase. You all use it in speaking of her. I ought to remind you, Barry—it is best for you to bear in mind—what a wreck may come out of the wrestle for life. Dr. Lawrence agrees with the rest that she can never be altogether strong again; that should she grow to womanhood the care requisite to preserve her in a moderate degree of health must be unremitting."

"I will risk it!" I answered promptly. "If she remain an invalid, the more reason why mine should be the dear

right to cherish her. No! no! Aunt Evy! you cannot intimidate me by such prognostications. Not though I were sure she would never know another day, or hour, of health."

She did not tell me that this impetuous fling of the gauntlet into the face of Fate was selfish, if sincere. I know now that it was both, and that she must have thus regarded it.

About noon, next day, a basket was brought to my office, by a hired messenger. Just under the lid were two letters. One superscribed in Aunt Evy's hand—"*Read this first*," contained but eight lines.

"I beg you to believe that I have told the dear one nothing except that Ziba Gaskin is in the hospital, badly hurt. All that follows her knowledge of this is the outflow of her own heart and such Christian charity as one cannot name without reverence. She has just come to ask my assistance in packing the basket, and devising a sure means of sending it. She has not a thought that what she is doing may not meet with your approval. I need not counsel you to discretion."

This was Ailsie's note:

"My own Mr. Barry:—Aunt Evy says that when I heard you call that poor man's name, last night, you were telling her about his being in your hospital. Papa says I ought to know it, so that I need not be afraid any more of meeting him in the street. I have not been afraid of this for some time, now. I am very sorry to hear of what has happened to him. Would you mind giving him the things I

send, and telling him I have never forgotten that the poor old lady, his grandmother, was kind to me, the day of the thunder-storm? If he should feel badly because it was meeting him last summer that made me sick, please tell him not to mind it any longer. He didn't know what he was doing. That is the worst about getting drunk. I hope he will get well. I prayed for him, last night and this morning.

"Your dear little AILSIE.

"P.S. Don't blame Aunt Evy for telling tales out of school. I *made* her do it, and wouldn't be put off.

"P.S., No. 2. I open this to say that you must not imagine I am generous in giving what I do to the poor man. People who do not understand that the doctors won't let me eat fruit and other sweet things, are all the time sending them to me. I am glad to find somebody who needs them. It is a real favor to me, you see!

"CHÉRIE."

Aunt Evy had intimated truly that commoner mortals should attend reverently upon the impulses of such a soul as was held within this fragile child-frame.

I lifted the white napkin covering her offering as the pious Levite, who read aright the types and shadows of the first dispensation, might have handled a sacrifice after it was laid upon the altar. Beneath were hot-house grapes, oranges, golden-russet pears, some delicate wafers and a mould of calf's-foot jelly. I carried the basket with my own hand to the cot of him who had struck the vigor out of the sweet

young life,—forgetting nothing of his crime, while I compelled myself, by thoughts of his victim, to greet him civilly.

"You recollect me, I see," I added. "I am the physician in charge of this ward. I saw you last summer, while I was hunting in the Brightwood woods. Mr. Darling's youngest daughter—the one you met in the road that afternoon—sends you this basket. Your grandmother was kind to her once, when she came to see me at your uncle's, and she is glad to be able to do you a kindness in remembrance of this."

I felt that every sentence ought to be a living coal upon his head, nor did I regret, as a Christian should have done, that mine was the office of heaping these where they belonged.

He stared at me stupidly, contracting his eyebrows, as doubting whether he had heard aright.

"I will take care of the fruit and other things for you," I said. "You can eat a bunch of grapes now, if you like."

His lips were dry with fever and the drunkard's thirst. His red eyes glistened at sight of the luscious cluster. Yet, to my amazement, he put them away with the back of his hand; twisted his head over on the pillow so as not to see them or me.

"I'd as lief swaller so much p'ison as to eat one on 'em!" he growled. "You needn't kick a feller when he's down. No—nor she, neither. I ain't got quite so low as to be beholden to none of the Darling tribe. You can give your trash to some mean-spirited sneak what can stomach it."

I was detained by a press of business at the hospital that

night, and could not pay my evening visit to my little evangel. I wrote, instead, as follows:

"PRECIOUS CHILD:—I am too busy to come to you this evening. I have only time to write a little story for you to dream upon.

"A lily once grew by chance, on the edge of a mud-puddle. The result was that the lily looked very white, and the puddle very black.

"I delivered your basket and message as requested.

"Aunt Evy can put these two paragraphs together and tell you more than I have leisure to do now.

"Lovingly your Barry—and yours only."

I never enlightened her as to the particulars of the presentation of her peace-offering. It would have been like throwing mud over the lily.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### THE WINTER ROBIN.

E all attended church on Thanksgiving-day, even Baby and Aunt Evy who rode thither in a close carriage. By appointment, I called by for Ailsie, and two happier beings did not breathe the pure air of that morning than were we as we walked to the house of GOD in company.

"I've kept this new suit for to-day," she informed me, whirling slowly on one foot as on a pivot to let me inspect it. "I had a fancy to be new and fresh all through on Thanksgiving-day. It's the first time I've put on *real* winter clothes, and I thought about offering the first fruits. It's natural for women*ites* to like pretty dresses and all that; and though, of course, it really makes no difference, I felt, somehow, that I wanted to sanctify the first wearing of mine. I haven't one thing on that I ever wore before, from my hat to my shoes."

The "suit"—dress and sacque—was dark green cashmere, edged with black fur. A band of the same encircled her cap, which was of dark-green velvet. A small India scarf with a scarlet centre was tied about her throat. The dainty ruffles

she loved were in neck and sleeves. Gloves and boots fitted to a charm.

"A French child!" I overheard a lady say in passing.

"A good many people call me that," observed quick-eared Ailsie. "I suppose because my hair and skin are so brown. One of my *very* great-grandmothers *was* a Frenchwoman."

I knew that her bearing and the indescribable and inimitable accord of costume and person, which was a natural gift, elicited the remark. It was clearly and highly complimentary, but of this she had no suspicion. In calico or in camel's hair, she was the lady born—not made, and her sincerity matched her breeding.

"What a delicious day!" she continued, leaving the topic of her own looks for one more interesting to herself. "Neither too warm for the season, nor too cold for comfort. Not much like this time last year! I am very glad I did not freeze to death in that fearful ride from Uncle Richard's."

"So am I!"

I smiled at the seriousness with which it was said.

She went on:

"It was worth while living twelve months longer to be alive to-day. Doesn't it come over you all in a rush sometimes, how good GOD is, and how much we have to make us happy, and you wonder to yourself if there are really and truly such things as trouble and pain and death in the world, or whether all you've read and heard and felt about them wasn't a bad dream? That's just how I feel to-day—this

blessed very minute!" whirling around again on one shapely toe, as a slight token of emotion.

"I was just thinking over some lines that describe to-day," I said.

"Poetry! let me hear!" coming up close and eagerly to my side.

I repeated—

> "The shrinking day that sometimes comes,
> In Winter's front, so fair 'mong its dark peers
> It seems a straggler from the files of June,
> Which, in its wanderings had lost its wits,
> And half its beauty; and when it returned,
> Finding its old companions gone away
> It joined November's troop, then marching past."

"Poor day!" said Ailsie compassionately. "But we will rejoice and be glad in it now that it is here. I suppose we shall feel as happy over every day in heaven as I do over this. That's a pleasant thing to look forward to."

'Life is a pleasant thing as it is," said I. "Especially, when my little winter robin is well and bright."

She slipped her hand under my arm and gave it an affectionate squeeze.

I held it there.

"You are running up like Jonah's gourd, *Chérie*;—are quite tall enough to walk arm in arm with me."

"And are you, like Jonah, exceeding glad of the gourd?" she asked, with the upward twist of eye and mouth that meant teasing. "It is not a very elegant compliment to a

tall young lady to call her such a vulgar vegetable. Why not say pumpkin, or cucumber, at once, while you are choosing a pet-name? That would be something original, and more useful as well as sweeter than gourd. I tasted one once. Pah!"

"But Jonah's gourd was not what you think," I defended myself. "It was the *palm-christ*, a tall, graceful plant that shot up like a tree, with long broad leaves drooping over him like an umbrella."

"Is that true? Thank you for telling me!" she cried excitedly. "I never liked to imagine him as sitting in the shade of a coarse sprawling vine, like the one that ran up a pole at Brightwood last year, with big yellow flowers, and maybe, little green gourds, bumping his head whenever he moved. Yet one can't help being sorrier for him, after knowing that it was a beautiful tree, to read that GOD prepared a worm the very next day to destroy it, and let the hot sun in upon his head,—poor Jonah! I am afraid any of us would have quarrelled about it, and said, to GOD'S very face, that we did well to be angry. It does seem as if he might have enjoyed it a little longer.

"That's something also to be thankful for—that *we* haven't any worm-eaten palm-trees to fret over."

She said it in the church porch, flashing a glance, half merry, half loving, into my face. Then hers settled reverently and she entered the sanctuary softly at my side.

Still at my side, nestling nearer, and once laying her hand stealthily on mine, when fervent mention was made in the

sermon of the home-blessings, health and friends, daily food and raiment, spared to us during the year, she sat throughout the service.

Looking down at her as we arose for the last hymn, I "saw her face as it had been the face of an angel." Others besides myself, suppressed their voices to hear the clear tones, so full and sweet they were surprised to see that they issued from a child's lips, which raised the sacred song:

"O Thou long-expected! weary
Waits my anxious soul for Thee.
Life is dark and earth is dreary
When Thy light I do not see,
O my Saviour!
When wilt Thou return to me?

"Nearer is my soul's salvation
Spent the night, the day at hand;
Keep me in my lowly station,
Watching for Thee, till I stand,
O my Saviour!
In Thy bright and promised land.

"With my lamp well-trimmed and burning,
Swift to hear, and slow to roam;
Watching for Thy glad returning,
To restore me to Thy home.
Come, my Saviour!
O my Saviour, quickly come!"

She repeated the second stanza while we were walking home.

"It was a delicious hymn—words, and tune!" she added. "I mean to learn it all. Strange that I never saw it before!"

I heard her singing it above-stairs when she had gone up to lay off her hat and sacque. The refrain, "O my Saviour!" was on her lips when she rejoined me in the parlor.

A goodly number of us sat down to dinner that day. George Marr, his wife and six children, Wynant and his betrothed, soon to be his bride, were spending the family holiday with the Darlings. At the conclusion of the meal, the parlors were left to the children by the adjournment of their elders to the library for a quiet chat.

At the end of an hour I arose.

"You are not obliged to leave us already?" said Pressley Darling, hospitably regretful. "I thought you had an all day furlough."

"I have," I answered. "I am going no further than across the hall to see that Ailsie does not over-exert herself."

"I say!" interposed Wynant. "Do you propose to adopt that child, or to marry her?"

"Shame!" ejaculated his sister-in-law.

I laughed.

"That will be as she shall choose. Just now, there is a professional bias in my interest."

Ailsie danced up to me, at my entrance, handkerchief in hand. "You will be Buff—won't you?"

As the easiest way of effecting my object, I suffered her

to blind me, the operation being performed so faithfully as to flatten my eyeballs and threaten an embolism at the root of the brain. In three rounds I caught and identified her, and pulling off the bandage, proposed to tell the small mob a story. I established myself in an easy-chair near the fire. Ailsie fluttered to my knee; the others gathered about us, some on chairs, some on footstools; the boys sitting and lounging upon the hearth-rug. My darling leaned on my breast presently, and in the hope that she would fall asleep, I spun out my narration by unnecessary details and digressions.

At the *finale*, she sat upright, her eyes large and bright, and began a volley of queries and comments.

In the midst of them, I noticed that she put her hand to her chest, with one deep, labored inspiration.

"What makes you do that?" I asked, quickly.

"Oh, it is nothing! A sort of catch in my breath—that's all!"

"Sitting-still plays are best for you," said I. "Don't run again to-night, dear. I am afraid you have been romping too hard. Blind-man's-buff must be postponed until you are quite strong."

"Do you know, Dr. Haye," she enunciated, solemnly, taking hold of my shoulders as if to shake me—"that you are growing absolutely fidgety? It grieves me to say it—but you are in danger of slipping into old-bachelorish ways. Not that I object to sitting-still plays. Or story-telling either, if your next tale is as delightful as the one you have just told

us. There's nothing more charming than to sit in this way around the fire in the twilight and listen."

Around the fire we sat, then, until twilight became darkness, and the younger children were carried off by their nurses, first to tea, then to bed.

Ailsie and I had the room and red half-lights of the humming coals to ourselves for a good hour before the library-party poured in.

"This is ever so much nicer than even standing by the window and watching for you," she murmured, contentedly, lying back on my shoulder, her cheek against mine.

I never held her thus, now a days, without a heart-ache at the lightness of the weight. The hand I pressed to my lips was almost translucent; the palm retained the shrivelled look and the dryness I understood better now than when I first perceived it. But she was better. She would get well. I discredited the owlish prognostications relative to future weakness and protracted suffering. How could she fail to recover, with youth, a faultless constitution, and all the assiduity of love's cares on her side? The full, regular throb succeeding the transient heart-pang was a pæan of gladness in the joyful going out of this Thanksgiving-day.

Ailsie talked on brightly.

"I read a story, the other day, of a book-keeper who had stood forty years at the same desk, and when he died, his shadow stayed on the wall for six months before it faded quite out. If I were to stop watching for you at that win-

dow, I dare say you would see something that looked like me there for quite a while afterward."

"I would rather see you!" I affirmed, honestly. "I don't like fetches and shadows."

She glanced away from the subject to tell me how well she was getting on with her Christmas work. "Aunt Evy and I" were making a great store of mats, tidies, cushions, muffatees, etc., etc., these manufactures being kept a profound secret from each of the prospective recipients.

"It is delightful—the way my pocket-money has held out!" she said, with the satisfaction of a judicious economist. "All the materials I shall need are paid for, and I have a dollar-and-a-half in my purse for Christmas 'goodies' for the children's stockings."

"And you don't owe a penny? Happy Ailsie!"

"Not a cent, my dear sir! The world and I are even!"

She did not see me smile, being engrossed in her much-loved study of the fire.

"Only one month more!" she sighed, presently. "Mr. Barry! you won't think me very greedy if I ask you one question?"

"*That* is the last thing I should accuse you of, even in my secret thoughts. The hungrier you are and the more you eat, the better I like you."

"But this is about forbidden fruit. I don't like to speak of it here at home, because they all feel so badly already that I have to go without so many things. Mamma would never have a dessert if I didn't beg her not to punish the rest

on my account. So I always ask to be excused before it comes on the table. They must eat more comfortably for not having my big, hungry eyes watching every mouthful. But don't you believe that I may have just *one* bunch of white grapes, and one saucer of ice-cream on Christmas-day? It seems babyish to ask it so long beforehand, but I want such things so dreadfully, that I dream about them, almost every night. I never used to be so very fond of sweets, either. I am walking through candy-shops and orchards, loaded with fruit, and whenever I have them in my hand, ready to eat them, I am sure to wake up. Even in the day-time, when I pass the confectioner's windows, I have to look the other way, or I should be tempted to smash a pane of glass, and 'grab' candy and cake."

She laughed somewhat tremulously to dissemble her real earnestness. I kissed the cheek so near my lips, silently. I knew that she understated the fierce cravings of a system in which the wholesome juices were perverted into poison, maddening appetite into greed for that which would be as oil upon the fire which had consumed strength and flesh. Yet this was the only complaint she had ever spoken.

"I take it upon myself to say that you shall have these and whatever else you like best, on that day," I answered. "The fruits of all the tropics, if they can be had. For twenty-four hours we will snap our fingers at the doctors."

"Thank you a thousand times! And—don't be angry! I try not to be impatient—but if I go on getting stronger and less skeleton-y, mayn't I begin to study *a little* after New

Year's? I'm really afraid I shall grow up to be a dunce out-and-out."

"I am not! If you continue to improve during the next month as steadily as you have in the last, we will begin to talk about lessons with the New Year. Am I a very stern master, pet?"

"Never anything but good and dear!" she cried, clinging to me. "That is one of the reasons I hope GOD will let me live. I want to do something for you—something to show how thankful I am to you, how much I love you, if I ever have a chance. I have been such a bother and nuisance lately! nothing but a great, clumsy, stupid sponge that sucks up everything that is given to it, and holds all it gets."

I put my finger upon her lip.

"No more of that—or I shall think you are fishing for a compliment!"

"I seem never to have known how kind people could be until this Fall," she resumed, when I would let her speak. "Or what dear friends I had. It is a lovely world, and this is one of the lovely times in it—to sit with you on Thanksgiving evening, and talk just as I please. It is good that you could get away from the hospital. You said that poor Ziba Gaskin was getting along nicely, didn't you?"

"He will be well enough in a week to leave the hospital."

"I hope he will do better after this. I am almost sure he will. It has been such a sad lesson for him. Can't you keep an eye on him, and help him, somehow, to be good, after he gets about again?"

"I will try, Ailsie—if you wish it."

The reserve of the sentence had to be brought up to help the van off the field. She noticed my stammer.

"I *do*—honestly and truly! Why not? He never meant to do me real harm. If he did, it is time that I forgave him. Nobody but a heathen remembers a hurt for two whole months. I wouldn't trouble myself not to forgive him, or anybody else, when there are oceans of pleasanter matters to think of. He never had a fair chance—at least, if his father and mother were like his uncle and aunt. No doubt they are good people. But don't you think the best way to make people love goodness is to make goodness beautiful?"

"That is sound philosophy!" assented I, admiringly.

My small teacher nodded sagaciously.

"It is something better. It is pure gospel. 'Let your light so shine, that men may glorify your Father in heaven.' That isn't the text, precisely, but it is the meaning of it. I saw Mrs. Gaskin light a home-made tallow candle, once. 'A dip,' she called it. It was made up, when she had got it going, of a great deal of bad smell and snuff and smoke, with a little sick-looking yellow blaze in the middle. It didn't do her much credit. I have thought of it many times, since, and hoped my glorifying the Father wouldn't be like that. If poor Ziba never had any better example, we can't wonder that he has gone wrong."

This was not preaching—only thinking aloud. The slim hands were chafing each other slowly—the eyes full of shadows that were lovelier than earthly lights.

"I will try to help him, Ailsie!" I repeated, sincerely. "For your sake!"

"Philandering as usual!" called Wynant's gay tones behind us. "All alone by themselves and nobody with them!"

Ailsie glanced at him in saucy defiance, not offering to quit her place on my knee. She even stole one arm around my neck. He was jealous of her preference for her tall sweetheart, and she knew it; loved to play upon his unreason.

"You seem to know the signs pretty well when you see them," she said, her eyes dancing. "You speak like a person of experience."

The others were too close upon his heels for him to parry the thrust. He contented himself with a gentle pull of her ear and a "Sauce-box!" uttered aside.

I had promised to be at the hospital by ten o'clock. At a quarter past nine I took leave of Ailsie in the hall. It was her bed-time, and her mother was prompt always to remind her of it.

"You ought not to sit up ten minutes later," said I, at the foot of the stairs, noting that her eyes were languid, and that she repeated the gesture, that had attracted my attention once before that evening, of pressing her hand to her chest with a labored breath. "You are weary, precious child! Tell me! have you pain when you do that, or only a tired, sinking feeling?"

She answered as before.

"It is nothing!" straightening her figure and treading firmly up the steps.

On the landing she looked back and seeing me still watching her, threw me a kiss, smilingly.

Then I heard her begin to sing in the upper hall, catching up my word—"weary:"

"O Thou long-expected! weary
Waits my anxious soul for Thee!"

In passing from one room to another her song was muffled for a minute, but while I stood below and hearkened with a desire to know how she really was that was scarcely defined into uneasiness, another verse floated down to me, distinct and strong, which emphasized her figure of the home-made candle:

"With my lamp well trimmed and burning,
Swift to hear and slow to roam,
Watching for Thy glad returning
To restore me to Thy home;
Come, my Saviour!
O my Saviour, quickly come!"

The door of her chamber closed. I should gather nothing more by longer waiting.

I shall hear nothing sweeter until the angels' song shall awaken me from my death-sleep.

## CHAPTER XXV.

### "AT SIX O'CLOCK THIS MORNING."

A LONG, rather narrow room, with a row of white beds on the side bounded by the inner wall. The windows on the other carefully shaded by green jalousies. In every bed a man or a boy—for Thanksgiving frolics and amateur sportmanship had brought the customary influx of patients to the accident ward. Nurses passing to and fro with bowls, plates and bandages. Three doctors bending over as many beds. Through an unshuttered window at the farther end of the apartment a slice of pale blue sky, cut into irregularly by a peaked house-roof. Midway in the aisle between beds and outer wall, myself, staring at an open note which contains a single line.

I have had it perhaps a minute, but I have had time to pass out of my own personality, since I opened it; to doubt and then to disbelieve that this can be the same man who bound up the shattered hand of the boy over there, and talked to him cheerfully of the strong probability that the young bones would knit soon and firmly. Have had time to see myself as the soul, rid of the body, might survey the

motionless figure, rooted to the floor, with blank eyes bent upon the one line :

"Ailsie is very ill. She wants you. Come to us, if possible."

That is all, and it is in Evelyn Marr's handwriting. No date. No signature.

I think an attendant accosted me, and finding me deaf, touched me. But I remember nothing that passed until I stood in the office of the principal physician, asking for an indefinite leave of absence. He shrugged his shoulders and thrust out his lip.

"You could hardly have made the request at a more inopportune time. You must see for yourself that we need all the help we can get. Still—" eying the paper in my hand, then, and more curiously, my face—"if the call be urgent, Dr. Haye—"

I waited for nothing more.

I met Dr. Lawrence coming out of Mr. Darling's house.

"That dear little creature—" he began.

"I know!" I interrupted him. "What is it?"

"The end. But I had not thought it would be so soon."

"You are sure?"

"Beyond the glimpse of a doubt. You see—"

I left him to finish his pathological summary in soliloquy.

At the threshold of Ailsie's chamber I paused and leaned against the wall to master myself in some degree. I hope I tried to form a prayer for strength. But I had none before I saw her dear eyes and the welcome that leaped from them.

I could not speak until I had put my arms over her as she lay propped by pillows; felt her trembling hand stroke my cheek.

"My darling! if *I* could bear it all for you! could lie down here in your stead!"

"No! no! no! I am glad it is only me!"

The struggle for breath hindered whatever else she would have said.

"Only me!" In humility, in generosity, in heroism, it was the key-note of her life.

She stayed with us all that day. All that day! And twelve hours before we had promised her years upon earth!

Father, mother, aunt and lover—not one of us left her. But one visitor was admitted—the pastor who had baptized her a babe in her father's arms, who had yesterday bidden us rejoice in the possession of health and friends and unstricken hearts. She knew him as she did each one of us, thanked him—with the native grace which must still be hers, because so essential a part of her, in heaven—for coming to see her.

He was a good man, and his heart softened to yearning over the patient sufferer. He talked no platitudes, nor did he torture her, or us, with many sentences.

"Dear child! do you love the Saviour?"

"O yes!" a gentle surprised smile. "I always did."

"You believe that He is as certainly with you, now—as certainly loves you as does your mother here? that come

what may of suffering or change, He will never leave, nor forsake you?"

"I *know* it!"

Her voice was feebler, yet steadier than was his. The thrilling tones never lost their music.

"Shall I pray with you now, dear Ailsie? And what shall I ask for you?"

"Would you mind—" the familiar formula—"would it be wrong to ask that I may breathe a *little* easier? I should like to— if GOD is willing—if He thinks it is best for me."

A while later, awaking from a doze to see her aunt sitting at her pillow, she put out her hand in entreaty.

"Aunt Evy! do go and lie down for awhile! You must be worn out. You will make yourself sick. Papa, mamma, and my Mr. Barry will take care of me, while you take a nap."

Again, after tasting her beef-tea, she inquired who had made it.

"Norah," was her mother's answer.

"It is very nice. Thank her for me—please!"

At dusk of the heavy-footed day, I lifted her into a sitting posture, while her mother re-arranged her pillows.

"Take care!" she whispered, with her own roguish smile. "I have very little *breathe* left!"

Once, and once only, her mind wandered, and she tried to sing:

"Nearer is my soul's salvation,
Spent the night, the day—"

Articulation sank into a musical murmur.

Night had fallen upon those of us who saw only with the bodily vision. The light in the sick-room was screened from the dying eyes that yet recognized the loved faces about her. From the first there had not been a cry or groan, or the faintest indication of impatience. The strong, fearless soul was breasting the dark waters in the full knowledge of what had come to her; anxious, but for us; thoughtful of our comfort, and ours alone; resolved to spare us present pain and heart-rending memories.

At a quarter-past-nine—the hour of our parting, last night—she called quickly—a ring of exultation in the eager tone:

"O papa! papa!"

"I am here, my blessing! What can I do for you?"

She stretched her left hand to him, the right towards the—to us—invisible Presence on the other side of the bed.

"Papa!" It was like "All's well!" from the Other Shore. "I *know* Jesus is here, for He has hold of my hand!"

By-and-by, I heard my name, breathed lowly, but with exquisite tenderness, as in a pleasant dream.

I bowed my ear to her mouth.

"Mr. Barry! I wish—"

"What, my dearest?"

I shall never know in this life.

Nor, though she lay thus in our sight, seeming to sleep peacefully until the dawn of another day, did she ever speak again, or give other sign than the deep breathing of a tired

child, that she might still be numbered among the living of earth.

At day-break, as the night-lamps began to burn gross and yellow, the breath fluttered over the lips for the last time.

I was back in the surgical ward before the sun shone over the obstructing roof into the window at the eastern end. I was not faint, although I had scarcely eaten a morsel since my breakfast of the previous day. Not weary, for all my trying vigil. Nor had grief acted as a tonic, bracing me for the work of the hour by begetting indifference to personal comfort. I was simply benumbed and incredulous. The desire of my eyes had been taken away by a stroke so sudden and stunning that I did not know it had been removed.

Not even when a shambling wretch, his arm in a sling, and his lank jaws overgrown with a carroty beard, arrested me in my rounds.

"I say, doctor!" he said awkwardly, "I s'pose I shall be let go in a day or so?"

I nodded, and would have pushed on but he detained me. "I've been a thinkin' since you fetched me that basket one day, soon after I come, about that little girl of Darling's. I don't mind sayin' as how I'm downright sorry for what happened last summer, and you can tell her so, if you're a mind to. Ezry Gaskin's wife—what I *won't* call "aunt"—had some bug-a-boo story 'bout it's having kinder upset her so's her health has been poor, ever since. However that may be, I wish I'd never played the trick on her. How is she gettin' along?"

"She is dead!" I said, briefly. "She died at six o'clock this morning."

I saw his skin change to a cadaverous hue, his jaw drop in dismay, and I went on to the next bed beyond.

My head was clear. My perceptions of all pertaining to the business in hand were never more active. Yet my abhorrence of Ailsie's murderer was dulled into instinctive avoidance of him. I had told him of her death as I would have apprised him of that of the uncle's wife so hated by him, had it fallen in the way of my duty to do it.

I said over the words to myself while I dressed a gash in the head of "No 13," received in an oyster-cellar on Thanksgiving night:

"She is dead. She died at six o'clock this morning."

The two sentences should have meant much to me; ought to have changed instantly and forever the complexion of my existence.

Yet I had uttered them like a just-wound automaton, in measured, passionless phrase. I must be sorry for what had "happened," I thought, in such mechanical commonplaces as I spoke. In the course of time, in a few hours, perhaps—when I could get away to my office, and think it over, I should surely be grieved to the heart.

I stopped at the bed of a young fellow, about my own age, who had been severely burned the night before, in attempting to extinguish the blazing dress of a child. He had borne up bravely, reported my substitute in the ward at the time he

was brought in. I found him crying silently, his face hidden in the pillow.

"Are you in much pain?" I inquired. "Perhaps fresh dressings may be a great relief to you."

"I don't mind pain for myself. I was thinking of her what I tried to save and would have laid down my life for,—thankful! My little sister, she was, sir! Just six years old, and all I had since mother died. The cutest young one you ever see. She didn't live an hour after she was burnt. I wouldn't be so much as touched till I saw the breath was out of her. Then, I didn't care what became of me. It's hard lines, doctor!"

"Somebody else is dead—" I was near saying to him. "She died at six o'clock this morning."

I know I had the impression that if I were to tell him my news, he would think no more of the burnt baby he bewailed.

The forenoon's work over, I sat down at my office-table to make the usual summary for the chief's inspection. My mind was firm on its poise. Brain and memory were competent to their duty. Yet I actually began at the top of the page, bearing the date, the haunting formula that had pursued me all day. Guarding every pen-stroke and reconsidering each sentence I framed before writing it down, I finished the record, and showered sand over the fresh lines.

Then I put on my hat and passed into the street.

My sister met me on the second block from the hospital; ran up to me and seized me by the button.

"This is dreadful about dear little Ailsie!" she cried, her eyes reddening with moisture. "I suppose you have heard it! I never was more shocked than when Mrs. Burtiss stopped me and told me just now."

"She is dead!" I answered, looking curiously at her easy tears. "She died at six o'clock this morning."

"You can't be well yourself, Barry! You look like a fright. No more color than a ghost. I do hope you are not going to have another spell of fever. You will call upon the Darlings very soon, I suppose? You ought to. They have a right to expect it—you've been so intimate there. Please tell them how sorry I am to hear of their affliction, and give my love to Mrs. Darling and Miss Marr, and ask if Sam or I can be of any service—that's a dear boy! You doctors don't mind going where there has been a death. But it fairly uses me up. I don't recover the tone of my nerves, for days afterward. And do take care of yourself. You are overworked in that horrid hospital. I can't see why you stay there. But you never cared for anything except your profession."

I looked up from the particular point in the sidewalk where I was used to stand to kiss my hand to the watcher on the other side of the window. The blinds were fast shut. The house had a gloomy, forbidding aspect to me before I saw the mute and awful signal pendent from the bell-knob, telling of slain Hope and Death triumphant.

I had a latch-key. Ailsie had given it to me, a month ago,

—adding in her best brogue—"And let it be a hint to yer Honor!"

I had never used it without recalling the injunction and how she looked when she said it. I almost smiled at the recollection now, when I fitted it in the lock. No one was visible in the halls. The house was still as if it had no living tenant save him who had just entered.

I knew where I should find what I sought, and I mounted the stairs to the guest-chamber. The door was locked, the key on the outside. I turned it, withdrew it, and locked myself in.

Kneeling by the bed, I laid back the sheet from the face, and gazed without let or hindrance from others' observation, upon the still majesty the covering had concealed. There was not one childish lineament. The beautiful spirit had left a cast of itself upon the pillow, as it sped to join its mates. The pure oval of the cheek and chin, the expanse of brow; the carven bow of the mouth were womanly—angelic—yet hers and hers alone to me who had searched out the hidden treasures of heart and intellect.

Amid the white calm of the Presence-chamber, I knelt, neither moving nor weeping; sight and thought enchained by what I looked upon, until the daylight began to wane.

The merest trifle broke the spell.

I had brought a ruby ring to Ailsie from Paris, which she had worn constantly since, shifting it from one finger to another as her hands grew thinner. If it had not been left upon the forefinger of her right hand where I had seen it

yesterday, I would ask it of her mother, as a souvenir that should never leave me.

I drew down the covering, and lifted the slender fingers to the light glimmering between the barred shutters.

Oh! the piteousness of the wasted little hand! In one flash—swift as vivid—thought showed her to me as I had seen her first; the nut-brown sprite of the wooded creek—then, portrait after portrait, each more clearly drawn than the last. The demure duchess of our betrothal evening; my dauntless champion against slanderous and sarcastic tongues; the tricksey playfellow of my town and country rambles; the earnest student and the tender comforter; the unconscious preacher of righteousness to my ungodly youth—my evangel—my *Chêrie*—my Kathleen—through all, in all, above all—my little love!

"And has it come to this!" I cried aloud, in a passion of horror and grief that told me I had not, until that instant, been able to "make her dead."

God forgive me, if in my frenzied lamentation I boldly declared that I did well to be angry that He had claimed His own! I humbly believe that the Man of Sorrows accounted it as my infirmity—not my sin—that I forgot in Whose hand she had laid hers, and with what loving faith when flesh failed and tongue faltered upon her last earthly wish!

* * * * * *

Evelyn Marr rejoined her "twin" fifteen years ago. Robby—a noble young man, whose gray eyes, lightening

with mirth or darkening with earnestness, often thrill me by their likeness to others I used to study—is my office-partner. He will have the major part of my practice in time.

"Baby" was married last week. It was at her "reception" that a gay witch of thirteen or thereabouts, Wynant Darling's third daughter, in fastening a bridal bouquet in my button-hole, got her fingers tangled in a mere threadlet of a gold chain, and drew from the breast-pocket of my vest, a locket.

"If I ever!" she screamed. "Uncle Barry—the confirmed old bachelor—carries a medallion likeness next his heart!"

Her father chid her so sharply that I was fain to take her part and pass over the indiscretion with a jest.

It was not until I was safe in my bachelor quarters that, moved to something akin to tender remorse that I had thus jested, even to shield the abashed child, I opened the case and looked at it long and reverently. There is no pictured face within. Only a ruby ring, too small for the least of my fingers, encircled by a lock of brown hair and protected by glass.

On the inside of the lid are engraved the words—"*My Little Love.*"

THE END.

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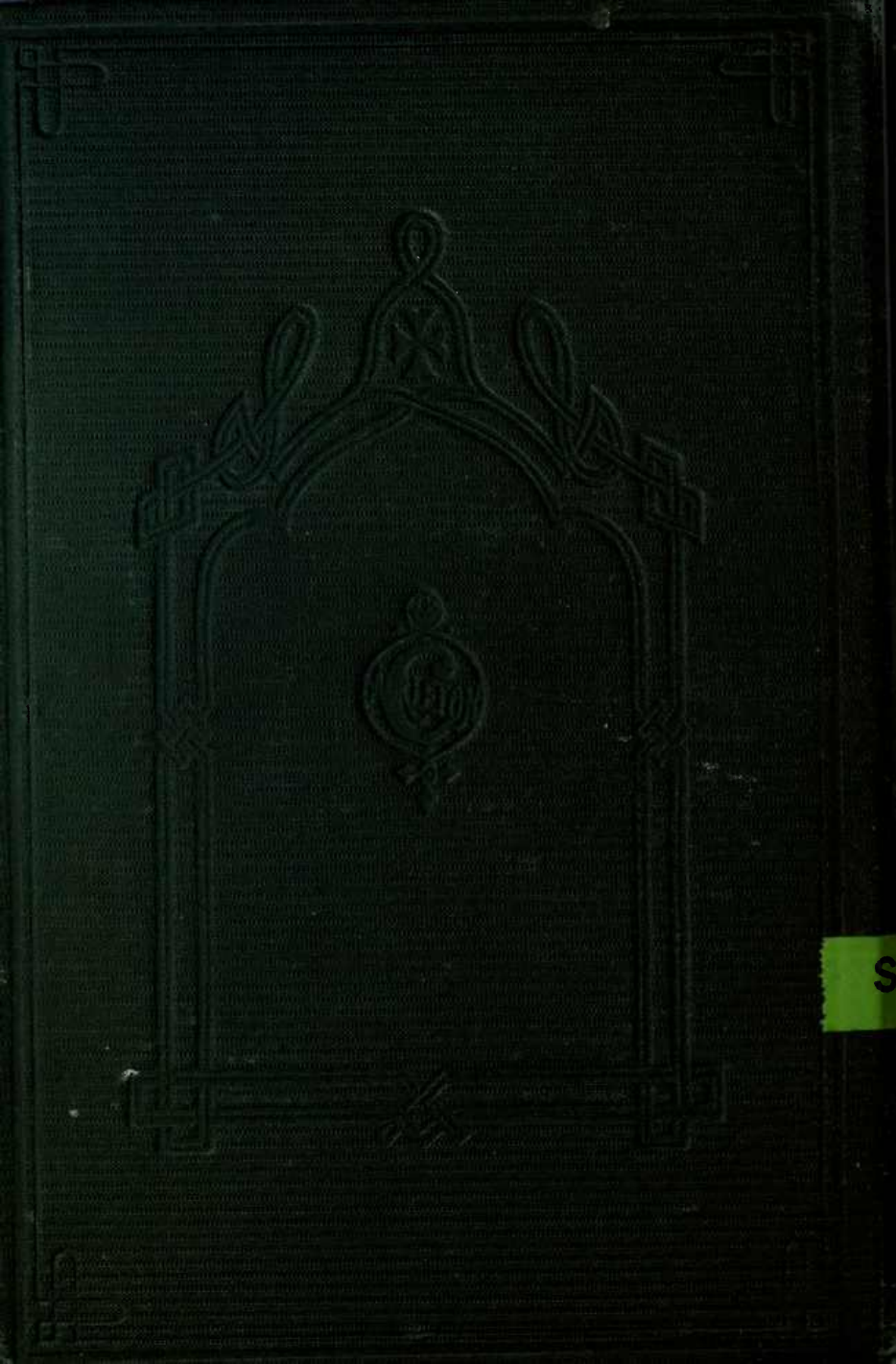
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